

Though Hell Should Bar The Way

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Summary: "I am not alone; they are here as well. I am frightened, but they are frightened, too."

1. Part I

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Part I

The day is already orange when they touch down, the 906th. They are more or less gleaming when they dismount from their dozens of pelicans and flood across the industrially-beaten tarmac with crisp orders and purpose. Here they meet the marines; men who are muddy and splashed with olive, who huddle close like depressed shoeshine-boys in winter and approach these new arrivals with dirty fingernails and uncertainty in their limps. The pelicans the 906th rode in on keep their engines running after the last man hops off, and the marines take this as a sign; they sling tattered rucksacks and rifle-straps over their shoulders, ready to fight for their seats, empty and enticing like a wavering dream they dreamed for nights now.

Nobody wants to get left behind.

A female soldier who just arrived shares words with a number of her cohort, and they confirm and scatter—the lady's in charge, clearly. A tired-looking marine sergeant, Charles Thompson, walks over and gingerly tugs at her sleeve. When she turns around she seems surprised at the motion, but it only takes a glance for her to understand; he's a man who looks tired of walking and tired of talking.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?" the soldier asks the marine.

Thompson nods. "Take it you're the NCOIC?"

"Don't let anyone tell you I'm not." She smiles and offers a hand.

"I'm Lake. Shield Company, 1st Platoon."

"Thompson," he says, like he's unsure. And her grip overpowers his.

"How are you boys? Ready to get out of here?"

Thompson watches his battered marines drift dazedly towards the waiting pelicans. He asks her, "Can you tell me what Army's doing on this rock?"

"Clean-up. I think you and I can both agree there's a mess that needs to be taken care of. 906th just so happened to be in the neighbourhood."

"You're going out there?" Thompson's head bobs towards the perimeter. His timid question slips past the protection of the fence and into the growling, squawking vista beyond: Cassandra is a beautiful ball of overgrown weeds. The sun is vanishing quickly behind the vast jungle canopy that stretches to the horizon, green and rolling like frenetic brushstrokes.

Lake takes a good breath into her lungs. She remarks, "The air smells nice here."

"Do you know what you're getting into?"

Her sweeping gaze travels over the shuffling column of downtrodden marines, their heads and shoulders slumping and feet dragging, and she ends back on Thompson. She gives him a long up-and-down for dramatic effect. "Yeah, I got some idea."

"Just doesn't shake you."

"Covies won't break me that easy."

Before Thompson can say anything else, Lake's radio hiccups. She listens for a moment then begins to walk off. Thompson stares after her until she looks over her shoulder and motions for him to come with her. He does so and she says, "You're like a stray, you know that? Scrappy little puppy-dog I got following me around."

Thompson's narrow eyes seem to resent the comparison. But the way he slouches from exhaustion, helmet missing, hair and beard shaggy, he's in no position to deny it. The tip of his nose is muddy. Lake, by contrast, is tall and upright, put-together in the way only eager young soldiers might be. She talks like she's tough, but keeps on this side of arrogant—"confident and ready. Her welcome level-headedness keeps Thompson in check, but makes him worried for her at the same time.

"Hey," she says, "sounds like 906th OICs are already talking to your people, but I don't want this backwash." Lake taps on her helmet mic. "I drink, I drink from the source. First. So you're my guy. Cool?"

"Yeah."

"How many marines are we picking up?"

Thompson looks like he needs to mentally calculate. Subtract. It hurts him to say: "About three companies. We're all that's left."

"Long couple of weeks. I'm sorry."

"You sure you want to go out there?"

"I'll give you boys some creditâ€"looks like you deserve it. You softened them up, I hope."

"Don't think it'll be enough." Thompson sees the wounded start to enter the stream of marines headed for evacuation. Men with blemished bandages hobble along, assisted by their buddies. Others are unconscious or comatose, bundled up in stretchers; their limbs are missing at awkward angles, taken off by heavy-handed swipes of a hissing energy blade. They're all quiet. They're all wide-eyed. Not unlike Thompson who stands close while the line passes him by. Even the marines who are in one piece are broken. He reaches out and pats a private he knows on the shoulder. He can't decipher the look he receives in returnâ€"not a smile, but not an accusing glare either. Just a blank, defeated glimpse that resembles mere recognition.

I know you, he seems to say with his eyes, but there is nothing more to say, because there is nothing left to see. There is a scalpel void of feeling and thought that follows and makes Thompson unsure of what to do with his hands, unsure of how to stand. The snaking formation of marines seems to go on forever. They seem to bleed forever.

Lake stands beside Thompson. She can see, and she knows. She resists the urge to hold his hand. Steady him. Afford him the simplest of tenderness that was stolen from the last two weeks of his life.

But it's not what soldiers doâ€"not with so many of her own watching. And they are watching her, she's certain. So she bumps his arm with the underside of her fistâ€"it jars her and she hates that she did itâ€"and motions they keep on walking. Thompson kind of stumbles after her.

"Tell me about them." Voice low, soothing.

Thompson takes a labored breath. "5th Mechanized, _Ferrata_â€"Old Ironclad. We had history, you know? We pushed the Covies back dozens of times before. The unit's been around even before the start of Trebuchet. Feel like... we let them downâ€"those who came before."

"Unit's still around, though. You lived."

"It sickens me that I did. Feel fucking ill."

"You think that it should've been you? Wish that it could've been?"

"This isn't something you live with, Lake. That I got out when they didn't."

"You and three whole companies. Saw someone sitting on that pelican crying 'cause he's happy he's going homeâ€"that the Covies only took

a leg from him, nothing more. Worlds get glassed and we lose whole goddamned armies sometimes so there are peopleâ€"myself includedâ€"who are relieved at least three hundred marines didn't go the same way." Lake grimaces. "So shut your fucking mouth."

Thompson is stunned into silence. Lake is too.

After a while, she grits her teeth. "I was trying to cheer you up. Fuck."

"Yeah. I know. Sorry."

"Me too."

"So, 906th."

"906th. 'The Highwayman.'"

"What's your story?"

"Suppose we go where we're needed. That's the mission."

Thompson asks, "You got a combat record?"

"Yeah, but not with these guys. Unit's new."

"Not that I'm ungrateful butâ€"

"Why didn't they send marines?"

"Yeah."

"We're Earth's last line of defense," Lake explains. "Could say it's what we trained for. Covies are pushing inâ€"need to start defending sometime. I mean really defending. Even if the Covies take our worlds, for every inch they gain, 906th will be there to punish them tenfold. Over, under, and everywhere in between... at least, that's the plan."

Thompson looks out at Cassandraâ€"the Okura river valley he managed to survive, still teeming with unseen Covenant forces. He says, "We fought 'em tooth and nail, the last two weeks. They pounded the shit out of us. They're entrenched on high ground, dug in so deep the only way you're digging them out is with the power of Christ and a fuck-ton of dynamiteâ€"even then you'd better hope for a cave-in, because once they pour out, all pissed off, you should already be making plans they don't take you alive. I say this because I genuinely want to knowâ€"and I'm hoping it's what happens, butâ€"you think Army can do what the Corps couldn't?"

"Let you know when we do it," Lake says. "Worth a damn try, right?" Her radio lets off a burst of static and this time Lake gives a response. A trite 10-4, and she starts off again. She tells Thompson, "Hey, it was good meeting you. I gotta get moving, and you should too. You'll get separated from your outfit, you hang around much longer. But those ships up high are niceâ€"warm showers, mess halls that are open most hours of the day... doesn't get much better for us, Pup. Enjoy it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Lake strides away, leaving Thompson staring after her again.

She rejoins the rest of her platoon who are moving through the tide of retreating marines, talking fast and waving their hands above their heads, looking for things. Some marines hug their rifles to their bodies like it is natural instinct, their hard, trembling fingers unable to be pried from them, while others simply dump them off to the side like they are shedding unwanted clothes in the bedroom—without their rifles they are devastatingly naked.

The Shield company men holler to the marines:

"Weapons and ammo, boys! Collecting mags, anything you got!"

"You're out of the fight now, you're going home! You don't need 'em! Got no use for a rifle in a tin can!"

"Anybody got grenades? Hey! Looking for grenades!"

"Need an MA-rifle if you have one!"

One kid, Horowitz, scurries around asking for any captured Covie tech. He's trading luxury items they don't stock on the ships—coffee-liqueur, warm-shave aerosols, Dijon mustard. He manages to score a Covie Type-33 with no needles. It's a hefty-looking tool that lacks its titular sting when there are no crystalline shards poking out of the top. He also gains a satchel of captured plasma grenades, and he's happy with his haul.

Horowitz isn't alone in his mercantile pursuits. Others wave meal tickets ("food paper!") and auction off personal bunks and quarters (one with a coveted hotplate) aboard the ships in exchange for field necessities—mosquito zappers and spare batteries, spider repellent, wet wipes. There's a few men who are slipping each other pills and syringes and the bargaining you hear there gets pretty heated on both ends.

Pelicans depart and arrive in a constant stream, ferrying the marines off-world and bringing the rest of the 906th down to Cassandra. The soldiers here wheel in large crates on dollies or drag heavy weapons mounted on tripods. A woman walks alongside them, one glove off, busy scribbling notes into a tablet. She looks up and waves at the sergeant.

Lake nods back. "Klepto."

"Hey baby."

Mousy, dark-haired Corporal Klepmann is the unit's unofficial quartermaster—procurer of fine things and nobody asks how. She promised Horowitz she'd get him a Covie shooter if he didn't have any luck with the marines, she's generous that way. Her resourcefulness makes her highly valuable to an outfit that relies on hardware so much—she's attached to Dog company, the new 906th arrivals that shipped down after Shield. Her people expand out around the perimeter of the tarmac, starting to set up the equipment they brought with them. They unpack remote-controlled rocket batteries and large-calibre machinegun turrets while the grunts get to work with shovels and sacks of instacrete. The barebones spaceport will become

the 906th's FOB with Dog holding in defense. Give Dog the night, the staging area will become an armoured fortress. But for now, Klepmann's next job is to take inventory on all the arms the marines relinquished.

It takes an hour and a half for all three surviving companies of marines to be shuttled away, and the 906th companies Sword and Charlie to join the rest of the battalion on the ground. Warthogs thrum their engines and form a convoy leading outside the FOB while troops load up and hold on, talking and smoking. Later tonight, elements from the 10th Air-Cav Regiment will set up shop to provide support in Falcons and Hornets, but by then 906th, 1st Battalion will already be deep into the jungle right on schedule. It's already dark.

At the landing pads, 906th's OIC Colonel Mattis and another officer Lake doesn't recognize step off a Falcon. Lake flags down her lieutenant, Moyer, and asks him, "Who's the guy next to the CO?"

Moyer squints. "That's LeFae."

"Yeah, who the hell is he?"

"Some lieutenant commander from out-of-town. Along for the ride, I guess." Moyer pauses. "He's ONI."

"What are we doing traveling with a spook?"

"I don't know but hey, 906thâ€"Seventh Armyâ€"was built by ONI. They want to see their investment pay off."

Lake says, "You feeling confident about this op?"

"Seems pretty textbook, doesn't it? Relieve our cousins in green. Shore up. Find a bunch of Helljumper assholes who got themselves lost in the woods."

"Thought the ODSTs liked being surrounded. Makes 'em feel... alive."

"Well LeFae says find them. If we can't break encirclement of one platoon, what the hell are we gonna do when it's Earth? If this is a test-run, call it a final exam. We pull this off, we get real fundingâ€"our own air cav, heavy armour, you name it. Right now 906th is as good as a damn ground-infantry regiment. So... if we pull this off, we do the incredible." Moyer smiles. "Ain't that appealing?"

Lake smiles back at Moyer. She's always liked him as an officer. He inspires that sort of calm, take-on-the-world buoyancy Lake tries to exude. Just a stabilizing force in a whirlwind life conjured up by the apocalypse-coming Covenant menace. He'd say everything is all right, and she'd feel that it is.

Moyer stares at his watch. He counts down with two fingers. "Speaking of Helljumper assholes..."

Both Lake and Moyer glance upwards to look at a frigate hovering just inside atmo, barely visible save for winking lights in the night sky.

Blots like swooping fireflies lazily plummet downwards, picking up speed. Lake tracks their descent with just her eyes.

Moyer's radio comes to life and somebody yells to be heard over the intense rattling and noise on his end: "This is Recon One! We're in freefall! Dirt in five minutes!"

"Coordinates locked?"

"All set! Inbound to the 112th's last known position! Hope they see us coming!"

"Raise us when you're ready. We're rolling out now, Reed."

"Copy that, LT! Give the rest of Shield a kiss for me. Recon One out!"

In the silence that follows, Lake asks Moyer, "How is the sergeant?"

"He might be smashed to bits in five minutes or he might not."

"He knew the risks."

"Erica."

Lake turns.

"Don't forget to breathe."

They watch the falling HEV pods for a while longer before Moyer and Lake gather their gear, slap on their helmets, and jog towards the waiting convoy of 1st Platoon warthogs.

When Lake finds hers, Captain Stern calls out her name. She marches over to him. He says, "Lake, I need a favour."

"Yessir."

"You know what happened to 5th, right?"

"Real goddamn shame, is what."

"It'd be smart of us to get some real intel on the valley. Not just through our earpieces or satellite feeds. Tactile. Real-world know-how. Which is why I've taken on help."

"Sir?" Lake raises an eyebrow. Stern steps aside and points to three men standing in a small circle that is really a crooked triangle, sharing a cigarette. At Stern's mention, they drop the spent butt and approach Lake. They're marines. Two are helmeted strangers. The last is scruffy and a little short. Bearded. Muddy. Lake narrows her eyes and really frowns.

Stern says, "Lake, Sergeant Thompson, and Privates Putnam and Meagre. They're coming with us as guides."

"They're tired, sir," Lake says coolly. "Sure they won't slow us down?"

"They volunteered and I won't turn away help. So take care of them." Stern turns and moves back to the CPâ€"he and the rest of the company will join them soon, he's insisted. Putnam and Meagre nod to Lake and look for a ride amongst the convoy.

Thompson says to her, "Hello, Sergeant."

"You should have taken that shower, Pup." Lake leans forward and scrunches up her face. "You stink."

They move to her warthog and Lake tells Thompson to get in the back. She clambers into the passenger seat and clutches her radio mic and barks out, "Let's lead the way, Shield! Roll!"

The warthogs roar in response and Lake buckles up, the jerky motion of acceleration throwing her back into the seat cushion. Thompson hangs onto the side of the truck bed, his body being tossed by the feral muscle behind the vehicle. Dog company, still working on erecting defenses, waves see-ya to the departing platoon as one by one the snuffling warthogs tear out of the FOB into the night.

Bluish headlights blaze the trail the marines made two weeks beforeâ€"the trail they marched up proudly and ran back down, Covenant hard on their heels. Farther up Thompson knows they'll find the path littered with bodies of marines and burned out vehicles lining the side of the road. He stares at the back of Lake's headrest. She turns once, catches his eye, then peers through the windshield. She doesn't look back like that again for the rest of the drive.

The convoy forges ahead, branches and leaves snapping against glass. Tires chew up the trail and mud spews from wheel-wells like exposed arteriesâ€"The Highwayman comes riding riding riding.

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Almost forty-five minutes later, Lake's warthog rounds a bend and its headlights shoot up the trail, illuminating a lone figure perched atop a supply crate. A rifle rests across his lap as he brings a hand to his eyes, protecting them from the searing high-beams coming his way. Lake's driver pulls to a stop and she steps out, walks up.

The man says to her, "Hi, Lake."

"Reed. Fancy seeing you here."

"You have a nice drive?"

"I enjoyed it."

"I'll say. Took your time, I'm thinking. I been waiting here a while."

"Well you know how I feel about air-travel."

Sergeant First Class Reed is tickled by thisâ€"he just jumped out of a ship. He looks over the convoy of 1st Platoon Shield men. "Is this all there is?"

"Rest'll come when you give the go ahead."

"Me and the boys sniffed around," Reed says, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "We're on the right track, that's for sure."

"Stern will be happy to know."

"Can I get a ride?"

"If you can find somewhere to stow your stuff," Lake says, eyeing Reed's supply crate.

"We can just toss out Conklin. Him and fat-ass Kinley. Should be enough room after that."

Lake gets back into her warthog while Reed motions for some soldiers in the next hog to pack up the spare ordnance, then moves to follow her. He pulls himself up and into the truck bed, depositing his rifle and helmet first.

Righting himself, Reed sees the marine sitting across from him and says, "You're new."

Lake introduces him over her shoulder. "Pup Thompson. Sergeant First Class Reed."

"Pup? That really your name?" Reed asks.

"No."

"Well nice to meet you." Reed leans back and looks at the warthog behind them—"they're thumbs-up ready to move. He raps a go-on on the side of truck bed, and the convoy takes off again.

"Where are we going?" Lake asks.

"This way another ten minutes. You'll see where to turn off. Wyatt and the rest of Recon are there now," Reed tells her. "It's a good location. Not too open—"riverbank against our backs. Water's deep enough 'round this bend I think Covie will drown if he tries to cross."

"You see any out here?"

"Not yet."

"So how do you know we're on the right track?"

"Meant, none that are alive. The guys we're after? 112th? They left a trail of bloody breadcrumbs, the way only Helljumpers know how."

"Suppose you'd know."

Reed just smiles because he's a Helljumper in an Army uniform.

Thompson asks him, "What's your place in all this, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Shield Recon," Reed says. "How should I explain... You study history?"

"25th century. If that."

"Second world war?"

Thompson shakes his head. "Ancient."

"When the Germans, well, the Nazis were falling back to Berlin at the end of the war, Hitler threw together a supergroup of SS commandos and called the whole thing Operation _Werwolf_."

Lake says to Reed, "What about Operation Valkyrie?"

"We'll get to that. Anyway," Reed says to Thompson, "Hitler's 'werewolves' would help out the retreating army units by making things tough as hell for the advancing allied ones. Demolitions, assassinations... you get the idea. Supposedly legendary at what they did."

"Did it work?"

"Well, historians are pretty fickle about it all. Think what it came down to in the end was morale. You tell a losing army there's an ace up the Fuhrer's sleeve, it's bound to make a few of 'em smile. Fight a little harder. Guess that's what we're aiming for."

"And Valkyrie?"

"It's a call to arms. Day of days, if ever there needed to be one. Hope it doesn't come to that, though."

Thompson studies Reed. The man moves with a definite swaggerâ€”an experienced soldier with good, easygoing nerves in enemy territory.

Reed isn't unique in this way... most members of the smallish Shield Recon are ODSs or marines who washed out of the Helljumper version of Hell week but got a second chance in the 906th. Reed's is a small outfit under Captain Stern's command that, from its conception, promised its volunteers free-reign during operationsâ€”a notion that seems to excite most combat-minded individuals. As the unit stands now, Shield Recon is one of its greatest assets, built specifically for insertions both stealthy and not, in order to cause a ruckus behind enemy linesâ€”gritty commando workâ€”or simple reconnaissance and path-finding.

The convoy eventually reaches the position Recon's picked out. 1st Platoon dismounts and gets to work with practiced hands, digging foxholes and setting up perimeter defenses for a hasty bivouac. They put in place sensors hooked up to battery-powered klaxon systems, and for extra security, they run a wire around the entire edge of the camp with empty soup cans and jingle-bells dangling from it. Primitive system, but anyone in Shield knows it. Can determine distance immediately and accurately by its faintness in volumeâ€”the clanging sound's ingrained in their subconscious after two full years of training and drills.

They settle in around a low fire and crack open their ration kits.

Lake shares half of hers with Thompson; he wolfs down the portion abashedly, but he's starving. Moyer sits across from them while Reed stretches out nearby, head resting on his rucksack and hand, and a cigarette tucked between his lips. He looks content.

He glances at Thompson. "Your first night here—"how was it?"

"Two weeks back?"

"Yeah. Pounded ground, what then?"

Thompson clears his throat. "We were fighting almost immediately."

The scrape of spoons pauses momentarily. There's just the whispered cackle of anxious embers.

"Covenant wasn't just hiding in the bushes. They had air support. Heavy armour. We knocked out three wraith tanks that first night," Thompson says. "They were doing everything out in the open. Predictably. All the work was done by Air-Cav—"carpet bombings that were just... devastating. Beautiful. Armoured just had to roll in, keep pushing up. Covies put AA batteries where we could see them and all it took was a couple of good mortar rounds to put them down, and you know Covie design..."

"Unsubtle." Reed blows out a puff of smoke.

Thompson nods. "We had the uglies on the run within three days. They were disappearing into the jungle. We had the spaceport, why did we care?" Thompson pauses for breath. "Somebody called in the 112th Helljumper Division. It's understandable, it's what they do—"they jump behind enemy lines and try to break hard points. Nobody was too concerned. We took the weekend off—"hit the beach that's about two hours from here. There were folks in my squad who were getting... bored." A wistful smile from him. "Then word suddenly came down that said the 112th were in trouble. They had gone out of contact. Weren't showing up on scanners—"how that happens in this day and age is beyond me—"but they were just... lost."

"They die?" Reed asks. He has a scowl on his face. "If we're out here chasing ghosts—" "

"Imaging picked up a flare one night. We all saw it, it went up so high. We were elated... relieved. If there was even just one man still alive... Our CO, he scrambled everyone under his command and we went in, looking to rescue those Helljumpers. The only problem is, the Covenant are smarter than they look."

Lake, Reed, and Moyer are quiet. They know how Thompson's story ends.

He continues, "When they ran for cover in the jungle, they knew exactly what they were doing. See, we were fighting grunts up until this point, with the odd officer to keep them in line. We were equipped to deal with mechanized units in big, open spaces. It was easy." Thompson stops suddenly; he looks like he's blasphemed. He corrects himself: "It was manageable. But whoever lurks this jungle? They're more dangerous than anything I've ever been pitted against."

"What changed?" Lake asks.

"Bet you've all been in some pretty hairy situations," Thompson says, looking each soldier in the eye. "But it won't prepare you for whatever's coming."

"Christ. You need a fuckin' flashlight, Pup? Come on. Get to the part where we all scream," Reed says.

"God knows how long they were here, waiting for us to dip a toe in the water. They never hit us from the front. Always from the sides. Always from behind. Even when we regrouped, formed a defensive line, they picked us off. Forced us to move. And when we had good cover, they boxed us in like wolves would. Pushed in with shields up until they were right on top of us. Beaks. Claws. They're not a regular Covie unit," Thompson says, voice hushed. "I never saw a single grunt from the moment we entered the bush. They're all vultures. Jack infantry. Jack snipers. Skirmishers. Sometimes elite officers. Unit's hardened. Coordinated. It'd honestly put me more at ease if I thought they were mindless and stubborn, eager to charge into lines of machinegun fire and try to overcome with manpower and dogma. But no such luck. They're crack troops. They'll give up territory in an instant if they can come back and get at you from another angle. Fake a retreat, turn on a heel and blow you straight out of your socks. They're sneaky like that. Cunning. They're where you don't expect. When you walk, you watch the trees. You watch your feet."

"But don't look down too long." It's Meagre who says this. He wanders over to the fire and takes a knee by Thompson. "He'll take you when you ain't looking, 'cause you can't hear him."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Lake says.

"Who?" Reed echoes.

Thompson says, "I know you laugh when we say he lurks around here, but it's the truth. Guys who came back, running for their lives, they all shared stories that don't sound too different. There's a skirmisher out there with a gold headpiece. Like a skull, I guess. Has red feathers."

Meagre says, "We call him Rooster."

"Doesn't wear armour, or not a lot of itâ€"doesn't gleam in the light. He moves quiet, swift. Works fast. Goes for the jugularâ€"stops you from screaming out. He's got a damn bird-cry that's loud and makes you shiver if you hear it. And he doesn't just come for you one at a time, either. He's taken on groups of marines."

"If that's the case, where are these stories coming from?" Reed says, annoyed.

"He doesn't always kill you. There's boys who came back with their eyeballs carved out. Rooster left them stumbling around in the wild until we found 'em, brought 'em back with us. Until the Covies overran us. First couple of times, we dragged them with us, managed to keep 'em safe. Told them to think of home and just keep sticking close but... by the end of it, nothing we could do but leave them, we

couldn't even take care of ourselves. I know there's a man in my squad who's still thinking we should've put them down, ended that kind of misery."

"Jesus Christ," Lake murmurs.

"Rooster is real," Meagre says. "He's scarier than any banzai squid I ever came across."

Thompson looks as if he's finished talking. With a spoon still dug into his syrupy meal of beans, his hand begins to judder. He's rattling and clattering and everyone's watching. Mortified, he sets the can on the ground and slides it over to Lake with the toe of his boot like it's possessed.

Thompson stands and digs into his breast pocket for a smoke. Lake stands too. Her fingers are less clumsy; she fishes out his packet and mercifully slaps one into his craving hand.

"I'm gonna turn in," Thompson mumbles.

"Hey, you okay?" Lake asks him.

"Pup," Reed calls to him. He tosses him his lighter. "Hold onto that for me tonight."

Thompson walks off, thumb desperately trying to strike the flint—it's one of those lighters. Cloudy-looking silver. He eventually finds a place to lie down and gets it right. Lake sees a brief flicker of light followed by a huge exhalation of smoke; his back's turned to the rest of them. Lake stares at him for a long while, maybe until he falls asleep she doesn't know. Moyer puts another soldier on sentry duty. Lake wants to ask him if he was shook up by Thompson's recount. She wants to ask him if everything will be all right but soon she can't because she falls asleep too.

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The next morning Thompson rises and lumbers away from the camp, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. The sun's already risen; it's poking through the gaps in the leaves. He's careful to step over the jinglejangle wire and when he bends down to temporarily disable the sensors he finds them already switched off. He spots the morning sentry also milling around. The soldier waves him through.

He can hear the river from here. A lulling sound he concentrated on all last night. Getting closer. When he leaves the mess of trees, he blinks in the brightness. The water runs a gentle green over a bed of violently refined river rocks. On the bank they crunch and clack when he treads on them. A little upstream he finds Reed already here, crouched down and dipping a toothbrush in the river.

"Coming up behind you," Thompson said.

"I know." Reed starts to brush his teeth. He didn't even turn around. Through a frothy mouthful he asks, "You sleep okay?"

"Not really. Here, thanks." Thompson passes Reed's lighter back to him.

"You nervous?"

"Maybe a little."

"Area this side of the river is clear. Me and the boys made sure of that yesterday," Reed says. "Not a peep throughout the night, either."

"That's what's making me nervous."

"We're Shield company, Pupâ€"if you can't sleep here and feel safe with us around, maybe you should've caught that ride out with your pals."

"Did Sergeant Lake tell you?"

"Wild guess. 5th's gone. You're still here." Reed slurps on water cupped inside his hands and spits it back into the river. "So what's your deal? Why don't you want to go home?"

Thompson walks around behind Reed, upstream. "Guess I felt it wasn't my time to." He stares into the current.

"Dead stay dead." Reed squints in the sun at Thompson. "You with them, or not. Doesn't matter. Nothing does, much, these days."

"Is that why you're in this outfit? You feel like this is it? The end?"

"I'm in this outfit 'cause it fits me. Can't say anything to the future. Don't ask."

"Lot of talk I'm hearing about you folks. The Highwayman. Most of it amongst yourselves. But talk, all the same."

"We all want to believe," Reed says. "Just nobody knows for sure."

"That true? Supposedly you're the last line of defense. Your uppers know something the rest of us don't?"

"They're making plans. Everybody's making plans." Reed falls back on his rump and sits a while, an arm wrapped around his knees. He scrounges for a stone nearby, flat and smooth, and hurls it into the water. Doesn't skip once. "Pointless," he says. "Things change. Too fast. You'll be too late. Always too late. Can't go in expecting... wanting for things. That's not how it works."

Reed throws another stone. It sinks. Thompson starts to walk up the riverbank.

"You want to die."

Thompson pauses. But he doesn't turn around.

"Don't."

The marine's boots crunch and clack on the rocks below, walking off. There's another splash from behind.

"I got it that time," Reed calls after him. "You weren't even looking."

Wouldn't have even known. Tree falling in the forest.

Thompson picks his way across the rocky strip. He follows the bend in the river and watches fish dart against the current. They shoot upwards, past the section of rapids where the bed is shallow.

Reed's right. Thompson is hoping for a good death, one that others will agree was good. Like there is a way of measuring, a standard. It's the way they're supposed to talk about you when you're gone. That's what he wants. Here and now he's nothing. Made to feel worthless when he thinks of their faces, remembers their names. Even the ones he never met. He can still feel them. Fingers on his spine.

He kneels down by the edge of the water and slides his hands through the caressing chill. He cups them together and brings the handful to his face when he takes an easy gander across the river to the other side.

The water sluices from his icy fingers—his whole body's locked up.

He's looking at three figures on the other side, a little unsure if they're real. They're birdlike. One's beak is dipped into the stream while the others have their backs turned to him. None of them are armed yet. The first pulls back from its drink and notices Thompson. They stare at each other for what feels like a minute, both motionless.

Then the jackal scrambles backwards, jabbering, reaching for its weapon that rests leaning a few metres away. Thompson also tugs his rifle from his shoulder and scurries for cover, suddenly already breathless. He pinches the rifle's safety and wildly puts half the magazine down—it fires in single, uneven barks, sending plumes of water bursting from the river and bits of rock exploding all around the group of jackals. He dives down as they return fire, plasma bolts driving hard into the clutch of small boulders he drags himself to. The water soaks half of his body as he tries to burrow even lower.

On the riverbank, two jackals extend their amber and blue shields and continue blasting away. Thompson hears their chirpy nattering growing louder. He lifts the barrel of his rifle above the boulder and rips off shots in that direction. He doesn't know if he's hitting anything—he probably isn't.

The lonesome sound of his single battle rifle is soon joined by a second. These shots are steady thuds, superior-sounding in a way. Plasma bolts fly past Thompson's cover, diverting.

He hears Reed yell "Thompson!"

"Watch it! Three on the bank!" Thompson yells back.

"I see 'em, god dammit! I see 'em!" Reed keeps shooting. His boots tear up the rocks underfoot, clack clack clack.

Thompson creeps around the boulder to get a better angle, the water up to his elbows now. Reed's hit one jackal—it arduously crawls up the riverbank, bleeding—while the other two march forward, shields locked together; they crackle with conceit as Reed's shots chip away at them.

A whistling slug of energy bursts out from the jungle behind the jackals aimed at Reed. It goes wide but it sure as shit doesn't feel that way—Reed throws himself down on the rocks with a muffled scream and snakes over to Thompson on his elbows and knees as fast as he can. Thompson's already switched out mags; he fires indiscriminately into the trees.

"Fuck, they've got friends!" Reed says, panting.

When Reed peers out across the river once more, there's a high-pitched scream from above that lasts a full second before the two advancing jackals disappear in a ferocious geyser of smoke, water, and fire. He and Thompson both flinch and cover their naked necks as shards of rock and debris come back down all around them.

"Was that us?" Thompson shouts. Reed looks around.

On the far side, more jackals emerge from the bushes. They break into a run, the jackal infantry brandishing their shields before them while skirmishers in the rear fire overtop the rapidly forming phalanx. They're determined to run the two men down.

They can maybe cross the river within seconds, but they stop awkwardly halfway in the water when at first a few jackals tumble down, howling and gasping for breath as they flounder. Then Reed and Thompson both open up, and their rifles are accompanied by more and more, until the swelling chatter of weapons fire sweeps up and down the entire embankment. Soldiers from Shield company, 1st platoon surge from the jungle, all putting rounds across the river. Over the puncture of hundreds of pops and cracks, somebody lets loose with a snarling, fully automatic MA5; its tracers blaze into shore and stitch across the trees.

The jackals trapped in the water begin to pull back, their powerful shields shrugging off most of the fire heading in their direction. The volume of returning plasma fire intensifies as more carbines and rifles in unseen alien hands pepper Shield's shore. The men can barely make out their forms behind the trees, but they're there picking away at the comparatively exposed platoon.

There's an animal growl, followed by an agonized snapping of leaves and twigs—a warthog flies out of the bushes and ploughs into the middle of the river with a thunk-crash. Nose down. While it bobs a little, its gunner jumps on the LAAG and begins to unload on the enemy. The routed phalanx of jackals hit the opposite shore and start to run, fleeing to the anonymous safety of the overgrowth beyond; skirmishers still on the riverbank duck behind ragged pieces of driftwood—these splinter and explode when the chain gun's massive rounds buzz-saw through them, suffusing the entire side through sheer savageness of noise. Two or three skirmishers out in the open are just about shorn in half when the tracers rake through them in an effortless march.

Sergeant Lake hops from the passenger seat of the warthog and attempts to make her way to harder cover on the shore, firing off her rifle and backing up at the same time. The rocks under the surface are sneaky and smoothâ€"oily with algaeâ€"and with a yelp of surprise, she ends up ass-down with water up her nose. She splutters and tries to claw her way back to the bank. Seeing this, Thompson nearly stands but Reed yanks on his collar and hisses: "She's a big girlâ€"just cover her!" They do, and Lake successfully pulls herself free from the water, sopping and exhausted.

A whopping mass of plasma rockets from the opposite shore, ripples the water, and slams into the LAAG's protective-shield, turning it molten and not-there-anymore. It's a close callâ€"the air sizzles with thorny heat and the soldier manning the gun flings himself from the truck bed. He plunges his singed, blistering face and hands below the frigid surface of the river.

The chain gun's fallen silent, already a desperately missed presence in the soundscape of the battle. Relieved of the pressure, the skirmishers begin to pelt the neutered warthog with directed fire. The driver, trying hastily to reverse but is just kicking up frustrated twin jets of water, finally abandons the vehicle before the windshield blows apart. He crouches down behind a huge tire and retrieves a rifle he earlier tucked behind the driver's seatâ€"he's still in the fight.

Reed steadies his rifle on the surface of the boulder he's hiding behind and picks off a skirmisher. The rest squawk heatedly and keep low. But knocking out the warthog moments ago gives the enemy a considerable boost in courageâ€"the jackal infantrymen return, their resolves hardened. The skirmishers dart behind their brethren while the disciplined formation inches into the water. Bullets ping off their shields but the line holds firm. A mortar round smashes well into the rocky shoreâ€"too far behind. The jackal force is untouched, but now they're harried. Still, they're close enough for what they want to do. Reed sees the motion through the overlapping shields.

He screams "Everyone get back!" and then he hauls Thompson up and roughly dumps both of them into the section of rapids. The rest of Moyer's platoon get the hell away from the water because the skirmishers toss flaming grenades up high into the air and when they come back down, they obliterate Shield's side of the river. The scary, all-consuming blasts carve up the land and set blue fire to the fleshy vegetation; the heat nearly suffocates the platoon as they all scamper away.

The phalanx formation breaks into smaller groups, spreading out across the width of the river. When another mortar round touches down, only a few jackals are bowled over from the impactâ€"the concussive force shreds their lungs and they slip wordlessly under the water and never re-emerge. Moyer's people take up firing positions behind sturdier trees and they pelt the jackals with everything they've got. Sometimes the aliens stagger under the kinetic weight pressing on them, but they just press back, arms locked, pushing forward. They're going to surround the platoon.

Everyone looks up when the drone of rotors winds down the valleyâ€"the men under cover of the trees, the jackals in the river. A dragon's shadow shudders in and roars hot breath over those below,

relentlessly pumping fat 20mm rounds into the scattered formation. The first pass rips through the jackals like talons grabbing hold and tossing things less significant, the way they're blasted out of the water. When the chopper spins back around, hovering stable, the jackals look eerily like they're being squeezed together by some grasping hand and then held under and drowned.

The falcon pours fire over the opposite shore, its autocannon chopping down whole trees. Moyer orders his men up, and the platoon regains the ground they lost, reaching the water yet again. The falcon is met by a second, and then a pelican full of troops. The bulky transport swoops low and barely pauses for its load to deliver itself—two squads of 906th men stream out and land in thigh deep water. There's a man who takes an unexpected carbine round from a jackal sharpshooter nobody can see or hit though everyone tries. The wounded soldier's dragged to safety behind the twisted warthog carcass after losing his balance and collapsing in the water.

Moyer's platoon flings grenades across the river and wades in while the Covies catch hell from the falcon above. There's an obvious decrease and lull in return fire. Lake is careful this time, keeping her knees bent as she goes. She sees Sword company patches on these new men who assist, nods her thanks before hitting the opposite shore. From here the men bite into the trees, tearing into the bushes and leaves with entire magazines.

Proceeding farther in, she steps over contorted bodies of jackals caught by all manner of stray bullets—Moyer's platoon sure couldn't see what they were killing—or the guided punishment meted out by the utility helicopter: everything dies under that kind of rain, a gusty torrent that tears rooftops off walls and then starts a fire with carnal lightning. The trees here look like they've weathered a storm—branches hang from slivery threads, trunks are untidily hewn.

The men around her spot movement in the brush up ahead; they whoop and give chase. Lake looks back at her squad—nobody's been hit yet. She hopes to keep it this way. She tells them to stick close when she moves up. Metres away from her, Moyer also orders the platoon to slow to a creep. The only ones who don't are the boys from Sword, hollering as they tear through the undergrowth.

They leave the cover of the canopy first, and the land opens up into an enormous expanse of shivering tall grass, lazy hills that suddenly duck down then rear up into the air. Lake gets down behind a thick, fallen tree at the edge of the jungle. She calls at the Sword boys to hold up, but only some hear her. The ones that do, they crouch and look back at her expectantly but there's three who don't. They think they see the feathered cowl of a skirmisher blowing through the grass up ahead but Lake can't see shit. It's most likely the wind.

Too late, anyway.

Two Sword soldiers in the rear keel over when two rifle bursts ca-cackle out from opposite ends of the ridge and hammer through their soft bodies. The surviving man spins around in a panic and hits the ground. Lake scans the ridgeline but whoever they are, they're too well-covered. She yells over her shoulder, "Need a sharpshooter up here! Now!"

The man trapped out there tries to leg it back to the line—his head pokes above the grass for less than a second before there's a third and final crack. Blood rips across the needle blades of grass and beads together—it's now the only remaining evidence of three soldiers who disappeared beneath the undulating surface, devoured. The wind shakes the greenery like wavy fur, an agitated creature bristling in its slumber. It yawns and falls back asleep.

There's a rustle and a hefty clank by Lake's elbow—the soldier who appears is a Shield man called Paulson. He lays down a marksman's rifle across the log and says, panting, "Sharpshooter, Sergeant."

"Watch the top of that ridge," Lake warns. "Nobody else fucking move." She unclips a grenade from her vest, and with as strong an arm as she can manage, flails it into the grass. Dirt and fire spew upwards and out, and Lake peers through the sight of her rifle. A bird cries out a wail.

Otherwise silence. No nibbles. The snipers stay hidden. There's no Covie machinegun fire. Like they imagined it all, those three men dying. But Lake knows they're out there. The Covies fully understand who they're waiting for. They aren't jumpy, neither. Bad news.

Lake tells Paulson to keep watch and she duck waddles over to Moyer's defilade. She says, "Could be two, could be a battalion. Or more. No way of knowing for sure unless we've got eyes overhead."

"Maybe there's a point in moving forward. But not out in the open."

"Not out in the open," Lake agrees.

"We'll hold here for now. I'll get in contact with Battalion, see what Mattis thinks."

"I might go and fish our sergeant first class out of the drink, sir."

"Can he swim?"

"I kind of hope so."

Back on the riverbank, Thompson and Reed worm their way onto the bed of rocks, teeth chattering. The current swept them a kilometre downstream before Thompson was able to grab onto a branch—Reed clung onto the marine's leg and the two dangled uselessly for a while. Only after he let go did the river finally allow them into the shallows, grudgingly.

When they hear someone approaching, they reach for their rifles that are probably still bouncing along the river bottom but it's only Lake. She hands them two bundles she pulled off Sword's pelican; these are coarse emergency blankets that double as towels. They reach forward gratefully with pruny fingers.

Lake says to Thompson, "Least you're clean now."

He just blows his nose into the blanket loudly.

#

Captain Stern arrives in a whirring utility chopper. The riverbank is now secureâ€”perimeter defenses are put into effect and machinegun emplacements are set up facing down both directions with camo netting strung overtop. Shield men sit under tented tarps or trees, talking quietly and smoking, watching the river flow by. Its placid temperament betrays the furious killing field it was only hours ago, but reminders of the fight linger: the tortured body of the warthog has been towed from the water, and grim technicians stand around it or crawl underneath, wondering if she'll see combat again; farther down the bank, a sheet covers the heaped bodies of jackals and skirmishers collected from the shore or pulled from the river. Army casualtiesâ€”wounded, and some unlucky Shield men who died todayâ€”have already been moved back to HQ. Captain Wu of Sword company was among the wounded, hit today on the river by a carbine, and was rushed back quickâ€”now the Sword squads hanging around on the riverbank grumble about what's going to happen to the company's vacant leadership position.

Lieutenant Moyer and his sergeants Lake and Reed (joined by Thompson) meet Shield's CO when he climbs down from the helicopter and onto the rocky embankment. They pass salutes back and forth and head into a command tent that was thrown together specifically for Stern.

"Battalion's calling it Hill 449," Stern says, laying down a printed map. "This one's big, folks."

"So we're taking it?" Moyer asks.

"Colonel Mattis and the Lieutenant Colonel talked about it for a couple of hours. We're going."

Lake says, "That hill's pretty fiercely protected, sir. We couldn't bypass it?"

"Two reasons for why we need it, Sergeant; take a look at the map." Stern taps on the dead centre of the ringed outline with a spotless fingernail. "Look how high that hill goes up. It towers over anything else in the valley."

"Covies know that too," Lake tells him. "They won't give it up easy."

"112th is out there on foot. Estimates put them in the jungle just beyond that ridge if they've been walking. If we move up that hill, call it our own, we'll have a nice little base to work out of. A good rallying point. And it'll be a damn sight better than what we've got here. We can get the 10th Air-Cav Regiment based out of 449 and you know what that meansâ€”near-instant flyboy support wherever we need it, whenever we need it. I'd rather be up that hill than on this damn riverbank, and I'm not just saying that as a soldier. Mattis talked to a couple of meteorologists... said the river valley is known to flood a few times a month and that this week's forecast says we're in for a monsoon."

"All due respect, sir, I'm not afraid of getting my feet wet," Reed says. "Can't swim, butâ€”"

"Then you'd better learn," Stern tells him. "Flood comes high, hard, and fast, and there's more than a few warnings about mudslides. The last place you want to be is at the bottom of the valley when one hits. There's no warning when one does. You'll get buried. News like that's even got HQ sweating. They're constructing a levee around the place as we speak. Lucky them, they're in a field open enough all they've got to be worried about is water"but unlucky for us, a storm like the one that's coming, Air-Cav'll be grounded unless we take 449. Tonight."

"Nothing stopping us from heading back to HQ, waiting out the storm with a hot cup of coffee and a toasty fire to keep us warm," Reed mutters.

"Except that the 112th is still out there."

"If they're even alive."

"Lieutenant Commander LeFae's pushing for this," Stern tells them. "We don't come back 'til we've got those Helljumpers bundled up like babes. Those are his orders."

"Mattis is just gonna get pushed around by some Navy asshole?" Lake says.

Thompson and Reed, marines, both growl, "Watch it."

"Those are people out there. People who can probably take care of themselves, but still people. We're already late a week. We won't make them wait another, not if it's in our power not to. The way we go about doing that," Stern says, "is to take that hill."

Everyone in the tent is quiet. Lake's eyes are downcast because she's remembering the Sword men who were cut down there in an instantthe first casualties on Hill 449. It's the desperation behind the order that makes her anxious. The Covenant have all the power here. The water does too. For the 906th it's kill, die, or drown.

"ACR did a flyby of the hill earlier," Stern says. He distributes a stack of aerial-reconnaissance photos. "If there are machinegun emplacements, they're well covered. Imaging couldn't even pick up heat signatures. So we're looking for spider holes."

"Anti-air?" Moyer asks.

"No batteries either from what we can tell."

"From the look of things, you could take the hill with a falcon and a couple of warthogs," Reed says. "What the hell are they doing up there? How's Covie going to defend if he doesn't have any damn defenses? This isn't their kind of warfare."

"They're crafty," Thompson says. "You saw what a couple of squads with small arms did to a platoon and a warthog today. Now they're dug in, have the higher ground and the element of surprise on their side. I don't like it, sir."

Stern says, "Well isn't this what you're here for, Sergeant? To show us how to crack them open?"

"Can only offer advice, sir."

"Go on, then."

"If you can't take this hill by sunset, it's not worth taking."

"The hell kind of advice is that?"

"Anything else wouldn't be as helpful."

Stern turns red and he begins to scowl. "Helpful my fuckin' ass. God dammit, Reed, take the sergeant for a fuckin' walk please."

"All right, all right, we're going," Reed says. He gives Thompson a light smack on the back of his head. "Come on, boy. Come on."

Thompson stares at Stern, but the captain just shuffles through his papers and studies his map, waits for the sergeant to get the hell out of his sight. Then the marine turns and follows Reed outside.

"Sergeant Lake, I'm going to need you to marshal the men from Sword and Charlie companies," Stern says, still absorbed in his papers (but Lake thinks he just wants her out too). "They'll be arriving soon. Take into account what kind of ordnance they're toting, see what kind of support we'll be getting in terms of air power and wheels. And uh, see what the situation's like for supplies, too, Sergeant."

Lake doesn't like being dismissed like this, errands for the sake of errands, but she glances at Moyer and says, "Right away. Sirs."

When she's gone, there is a stuffy moment of silence in the tent. Stern lowers his voice so slightly it seems like he's talking to himself, mumbling an unholy confession, but he's really saying to Moyer, "Driving right up that hill, Ted. Frontal assault with all my power, everything I own. Could get bloody. Probably will. It'll be one long messy, bloody hike to the top, but it's something Shield's gotta do. Navy spook, LeFae, he's here for a reason I don't know. Observing, maybe. Well I pushed for the offensive, Ted. I told Mattis Shield would get the 906th on top of that hill. That promise needs to come true. Opportunities like this you have to seize, Ted. We won't become the unit we want to be unless we show them what we can do first. You agree with me, don't you? You agree this is our timeâ€"Shield's time to be great. We're a good fighting unit on paper, but we have to become moreâ€"we have to become legendary. That's the mission, Ted. The real mission. Running outta time. It's already '51â€"we don't have much left to lose, you understand. A war like this, the men and women on the front wherever need to be able to hear about us and stand strong one more dayâ€"and one more after thatâ€"and believe like nothing else that The Highwayman is coming, though hell should bar the way."

Moyer is barely audible when he says "Absolutely, sir."

"Shield's going straight up the centre." Stern draws an arrow on the map with a pencil. "Charlie will hold here and here in reserve, provide fire support with mortars for the time being. Sword's going to swing around and come in wide, just like in training. We'll have

the hill surrounded and goddamn we'll pluck clean those avian sons of bitches."

"What about the Sword situation, sir? Any updates on Captain Wu?"

"About that," Stern says. "Wu's going to be okay. He's out for this fight, but he'll come back to the unit when he's all sewed up. There's a scramble going on for Sword, bit of a power vacuum. You probably know that, though, don't you?"

Moyer nods, eyes slits with ambitious concentration.

"Mattis is taking names for consideration, and I've got a direct line. He's expecting my call." Stern gets in close to Moyer, until the lieutenant can smell the man's smoke-tinged breath. "You gonna listen to what needs to be done? You gonna listen to what I say?"

Outside, Reed and Thompson take a walk through the trees within sight of the riverbank position. Reed has his Helljumper knife out and he's sharpening a stick he found to pass the time. Thompson sort of trudges with his hands in his pockets.

"He rubbed you wrong, didn't he?" Reed says.

"Not got a favourable impression of the man, no."

"He's not all bad. Talks real big, sometimes. But Stern's got some experience at least. He's tasted blood beforeâ€"likes it. Met the man when I was in an ODS uniform some years back. He impressed me, I impressed him. Guess he remembered me enough to ask if I wanted into the 906th. Said he needed our kind of guts, knew how we liked to workâ€"had a home for us if we wanted."

"Captain seems a little hands-on. Thought that wasn't how you liked to work."

"Stern tells us to go, we go. Only time I see him is after the job's done. That's how I work."

"You enjoy what you do?" Thompson asks. He's watching Reed flay the bark off the stick, looking blissful from the simplicity and repetitiveness of the motion.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Looks like it from here."

"Suppose I'm... hardened. Little more so than a lot of boys from the 906th. Suppose I've seen as much combat as you have, from the sound of things. But you're asking if I like being out here?"

"Guess I'm trying to tap into the Helljumper inside you."

"We're not too different, Pup. One enters atmo in a pod, the other in a pelican. We've got reputation, is all. That's the hearsay you're listening to, and not me."

"Joined them for a reason, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't 'cause I had some kind of death wish," Reed says. He looks Thompson right in the eye. "Hell if I let Covie get me. I'm really hoping he doesn't. But not 'cause it'd offend me, to die that way. I'm scared of dyin', Pup, I am. Only reason why I'm here with the rest of you is 'cause I'm comfortable with killingâ€”the whole business of it. Doesn't bring no kind of enjoyment when I do it, it's just the time we live, man. Can't remember a day of my life Covie wasn't around. Can't remember a day I looked at 'em, pictures, then the real thing, and not feel like it's okay to hate. Encouraged. Some folks they let it get to 'em, feel like they're being called upon to go fight a holy war in God's nameâ€”think they won't make it into the good place if they don't take Covie down with 'em. They take that hate and they all take a piece for themselves, pass it along like it's gospel. Then everybody starts believing in its potency."

Reed pauses. Breathes. "But me, it's lost its power, we been fighting so long. I see these things and I don't feel angerâ€”don't feel sadâ€”but don't feel anger. Think they're like vermin to me. Rats. Always have been. That's how it is with us, you got little girls their first instinct's to jump on a chair and scream, even if they never seen one before in their lives. The way they skitter, rats, way they make a mess, way they're uncivilized, whatever the hell's the opposite of majesticâ€”they're it. They're unpleasant, and that alone makes it okay to remove 'em, so we do. Just remove whatever's making us unhappy. I don't enjoy killing rats; I don't enjoy killing Covie. Feel like I'm doing it 'cause of one thing and that's they're not us. Whatever reason somebody else's got, it's not mine. Even if they've set a hundred worlds on fireâ€”they weren't mine. Covie's just a machine. Mindless, wind-up-and-go. Don't enjoy killing them, but it's just something you do, I guess. To pass the time." Reed's fashioned a stake out of the wood. He admires for a moment its tip that looks painful and surgically precise before tossing it away and not giving it another thought. "Not even a point in being cruel about it. My days off, times like thisâ€”if I wasn't talking to you, Pupâ€”I'm not thinking of killing. Not fantasizing about it. Not keeping a rifle or tool I call beloved. Won't let it consume me like that. Make me mindlessâ€”bitter. I do, then Covie wins."

After a while, Thompson says softly, "I think I hate 'em, Reed. They butchered us."

"Well I wasn't making a case for stopping the war," Reed says. "Was making a case you shouldn't quit livin'."

Thompson thinks about this while they amble back down the riverbank. The sun's shrouded now. Rain's coming.

Up ahead, their number's grown by hundreds as men from Shield, Sword, and Charlie disembark from pelicans. They get their bearings, chat with Shield 1st Platoon who boast about their actions in the fight before and taunt their fellow soldiers, taking pleasure in scaring them about what's to come.

Sergeant Lake is still trying her best to come up with the figures Stern asked for when she runs into Lieutenant Moyer.

"Shield's ready for briefing, sir," she tells him.

Moyer says, "That one falls to Lieutenant Pelton."

"From Charlie? Why?"

"He's taking over Shield 1st Platoon, Erica. Stern put me in command of Sword." Moyer sounds apologetic, but there are no words of apology in the news he breaks to his sergeant.

"Why?" Lake asks again. She stares at him hard. She doesn't know if she's asking why Moyer's leaving Shield, or if she's asking why if Moyer wanted to leave them. Whose betrayal was it, motherfucker.

Moyer doesn't know how to answer this. So he just pats her on the shoulder, a coward's exit, and says, "Hey, it's okay. You'll just see a little less of me, Lake. I'm sure everything'll be all right."

Lake still feels a twinge when he says it. Less than before though, just now. It feels tainted somehow, perverted when it's used in this context. It bothers her like hell those words might not be theirs anymore—him to her, exclusively. She wonders if they were ever. She's not his sergeant anymore.

Moyer walks right by her towards his new family, Sword, and Lake knows it's stupid and girly to feel like she does but she feels like she's been cast aside and cannot help but feel that shitty feeling as she stumbles back to her company.

#

Shield's humping it up the hill, or trying to, anyway.

Mortars send dirt and grass spiraling into the sky and sprinkling back down. The rounds hack chunks out of the slope all the way up to the ridgeline, pounding down in a frenzied, continuous rhythm. Flashes of blue or green shoot out from seemingly the hill itself, and everybody fires at those spots until their rifles run dry or the hill meekly quiets down. As members of Shield company scurry forward, heads ducked, their trigger fingers are jammed down as far as they can go and their collective stream of fire shreds everything metres away in a powerful, outwards-rippling tide.

A warthog purrs, its driver putting it at an upwards roll, gentle enough that the gunner doesn't get bucked from the bed. He chops through the thick grass, spraying thumping bursts all over the ridge. Some soldiers slouch behind the warthog; when plasma fire flogs its armour, hissing and snapping, the men cry out and leap back. "This is crazy! Just fuckin' crazy!"

Sergeant Lake shoves them forward when they falter sometimes and roars at them to keep moving and don't stop. She keeps yelling this because she feels like her voice can't cut through the percussive blasts that slide off the hill and roll backwards into them, breezy gusts that grab hold of their shoulders and make them wrestle and strain for every step forward—that grab at her throat and mouth and smother her. Without her voice she is stripped of her power. She endures though and does what she can to get her people to follow her, advancing step by step, putting foot in front of foot because that's what she feels she has to do—they are watching her.

In the distance, a shade gun opens up on the company. Humming, burning globules splash down all around them and melt the grass, boiling the moisture that shoots out of the soggy dirt. Most soldiers dive down and disappear from view, Lake included, but she still hears a few strangled shouts all down the lineâ€”the shade's massive field of fire is devastating. A few soldiers pop up and return fire but their rounds slap off the sloping cupola of the gun and go everywhere else. When it swings around again, there's a man who doesn't duck down fast enoughâ€”the speed of these projectiles are dishonestly sluggish when they're far awayâ€”and when he gets hit, all of him becomes scattered down to the bottom of the hill where Shield's advance started. With her chin in the dirt, Lake barely knows what's happeningâ€”she can barely make out the thuds of the marksmen farther back, the continuing mortar storm, yet the shade keeps wheezing its raspy snigger.

Through a part in the grass, Lake spies a rocky outcropping that cuts a path across the hill. She doesn't know if her men hear her when she yells at them to move but on the count of three, she's goneâ€”darting forward through the grass, head bowed low. The grass falls away, and there's an indentation here that she crawls into. She nearly head-butts a jackal who is also hiding here, and with a gasp, she throws herself painfully onto her tailbone and scoots back. She fires once, her rifle kicking her hard in the stomach like a hard, malicious boot she's felt before. The jackal in turn screeches and shrinks behind its shield, its spiky weapon nosed directly at her. Then the inside of its shield becomes a violent, murky colour and it falls forwardâ€”Lake tucks her legs in to avoid itâ€”and its shield dissipates. It lies still. Directly behind it, SFC Reed crashes out of the tall grass with his smoking rifle.

"Hi, Lake," he says, panting, sliding down into the natural trench. His boots get buried in the muddy channel, the hill's winding drain-off.

"Reed," she says back.

Thompson also wades through the grass behind the two soldiers. Soon more men from Shield company push their way up to the trench and jump in. Lieutenant Pelton's among these troops.

"Shade's still unmolested," Lake says. "The hell is Charlie doing with those mortars?"

"They're trying!" Pelton growls.

"That gun doesn't move!"

"Are you carrying smoke grenades, Sergeant?"

"Wind's blowing hard in our direction, LT," Thompson says. "Smoke's useless if we get caught running out of the cloud."

Reed says, "Well I thought Stern told us there weren't going to be any emplacements, god dammit!"

"It's the grassâ€”hides everything. Consumes it," Thompson says then doesn't say "Might take us too."

"Who do we got still out there?" Reed asks Pelton.

The lieutenant looks confused, glancing up and down the trench.

"It's Koerner," Lake answers for him, heatedly. "Sergeant Koerner, 2nd squad. These are his men, so where the hell is he?"

"And 2nd Platoon?" Reed says.

"Who the hell knows. They should be here too," Lake says. "But we're scattered all over this hill. We need to regroup right now, Lieutenant."

"We'd be up 449 if we had some fuckin' air support," Reed says.

Pelton looks like he finally has something to contribute. He tells them, "I spoke to Captain Stern ten minutes ago. He said Air-Cav is musteringâ€"

"Mustering? That means they haven't left HQ, for God's sake!" Reed flinches when plasma spurts overtop of the rocksâ€"they all do.

"Son of a bitch Stern's gonna get us fucking killed," Lake says.

Thompson says, "He wants us to run up that hill. Sounds good to him when he says it."

Lake scowls. "I'm not budging another inch. We don't have air support, we're not getting out of this in one piece. My people aren't getting cut down because Stern doesn't want Air-Cav to mop up. Fuck that, and fuck the captain. Reed?"

Reed looks over his shoulder at his own squad, Shield Recon. Supposedly they're the best but anyone looking on might decide they're doing no better than the other soldiers hiding in the trench. He tells Pelton, "I'm with Lake on this. Until we knock out that shade, we're not goin' anywhere."

"What's happening with Sword? They left thirty minutes before we didâ€"they should be hitting them from the side by now," Lake says. "Can you raise them on the comm.?"

Pelton tries, but he is perplexed when all he gets is static. "Interference? Covie jammers, maybe?" He attempts again and again but Sword remains silent. This is alarming to the other Shield men. When he eventually reaches out to Stern, even the captain seems nervous about it. After a moment, Pelton gets off the line and he says, "Sergeant First Class? Stern saysâ€"

"I figured," Reed says. "Let's go do what we do, boys." He motions to his commandos, and they go and slink off into the grass, headed away from the line. Thompson holds up a hand, but Reed says, "Put that down, Pup. You're not coming."

"I can help."

"Don't need no volunteers for this. That's why Shield Recon

existsâ€"it's right in the name."

#

Reed finds the road Sword company took by following the tire tracks of a dozen heavyset warthogs. It's really a dirt path with chopped, parallel grooves that are slowly filling with water. He slogs along until a shot rings out and there's a splash behind him. Reed sees a skirmisher down on all fours, muddy and bleeding. It leers at him for a second before there's a definitive burst of rifle fireâ€"the skirmisher collapses face first and its bubbles cease to surface from the dirty puddle.

One of Reed's men, Wyatt, peers out from a bush. "Quiet little sods."

"How long was he following me?"

"You don't want to know."

Reed looks up the road with a frown on his face. Minutes later, they find the frayed body of a soldier lying on the road, parallel with the tracks. His hands are outstretched and he's facing the way Shield Recon's coming. He seems to be pleading, turn backâ€"you know how this ends. Recon, stoic, shuffles by after collecting his tags; he's a Sword soldier all right.

The thicket grows unruly here and Reed has two men up front to hold back the branches while the rest file through with their rifles raised, ever alert. He smells it before he sees itâ€"the dark, bitter smell that comes with inexplicable loss, the tease of a shattering sight of something you recognized once but can't anymore because it's too differentâ€"too unbearable.

This moment comes when Reed forges through the bushes and looks.

They were people before they were these tranquil imitations, stretched out and slumped over like they are holding each other before the end. Hundreds of them like torched cigarette butts along a highway, spent, used and exhausted. Their warthogs, too, are empty and morose. But he looks up as leaves come gently from the trees above and cover up the ground as if to shield those who lie there from the world; tucking them in, rustling whispers that promise everything will be all right when they awake again.

Reed finds a spot on the ground and sits amongst Sword company for a while, listening to the stories they tellâ€"hearing silken relief creeping into their gravelly voicesâ€"of a war they fought and someone laughs a faded kind of laugh and says I remember that.

2. Part II

Part II

The news spreads through the line like a cancerous secret when Reed radios in. There's not a man in the grass staring up Hill 449 who doesn't feel the lackâ€"the missing limb. They trained alongside Sword, lived together for two years. Anyone who says they're not

bothered by the news is putting up a brave face, staggered inside; or a hateful son of a bitch who had it in for someone in Sword. Reed's comm. report is cruelly short and to the point, and Lake doesn't ask for any elaborate details. They're "gone," but are all of them? She doesn't want to know right now. Doesn't want to ask and really make true what she already thinks, just in case. That's a fear she has because there's still that sliver she holds onto, and she'll wait for it to get taken away rather than toss it herself.

That shade gun's still up, spitting. She despises the sound it makes. It's arrogant and gaudy and sounds like reckless laughter.

"Where the hell are we going, Sergeant?" her men behind her shout.
"Where the hell are we going?"

She doesn't know. She looks at Lieutenant Pelton but he's got his hands wrapped tight around his helmet because he thinks he's going to die in this trench. He wasn't fit to take over Shield—he's probably never seen combat up close, the way he trembles now. But Lake doesn't hate him for it. Everybody's scared.

"What does Stern say?" Lake asks Pelton.

Pelton looks like he's about to throw up. "He says we keep moving."

"We just lost our flank and he wants us moving?"

"Sergeant, I want..." Pelton can't even finish his sentence; he swallows back something and looks helplessly over the lip of the trench. "Sergeant, I want you to..."

"I know, LT." Lake looks at her squad and the rest of the stragglers from 2nd. A private first class named Huck and his assistant lugged a Jackhammer launcher and a few cases of rockets between them up the hill this far. She says, "Need to knock out that emplacement. Think you can make the shot from here or close by?"

Huck shares a squinty look with his assistant like he's pulling on a cigarette and holding in a smoky breath. "Closer."

"All right. All right," Lake says, glancing around. Huck won't venture out there by himself, and Lake suspects there's many who won't. One wrong move and that shade will rip you apart.

Thompson of course doesn't care, though. He slides on over and says, "I'll take 'em, Lake. I'll head up that way."

Nobody else in Shield wants to volunteer; their eyes are downcast when Lake rakes through them with her own, her gaze searing. "Yeah, Pup, okay," she finally says. "Okay. Wait 'til I give the signal, then you move up."

Thompson beckons to Huck. "You know where we need to get to?"

"Can probably see it from here. 'Bout two hundred metres that way."

"All right, let's get going. Take only what you need. If we miss the first shot, don't think we'll be getting that second one off,"

Thompson says. They unstrap and unbuckle, dropping things into a pile they plan on coming back to. Huck carries only a sidearm and his Jackhammer, his assistant gunner a rifle and a spare rocket slung around his neck.

Huck tells the Shield men near the item pile he'll fucking kill them if he comes back and anything's missing. Nobody wishes him good luck out there.

Lake tells her squad to get to the opposite end of the trench and make a lot of noise on her go. Thompson gives her a thumbs-up. She tells him, "Stay low. Be safe."

"Yeah, Lake."

"All right, do it!" Lake jabs a hand towards her squad, and they stand a bit and fire their rifles at the shade gun or all around it. Just as quickly they dive back down into the trench as screaming plasma tears by overhead and sets fire to the grass; the tall weeds smoke like lazy sticks of incense. Thompson and Huck and his assistant scramble over the edge of the lip and into the grass so low to the ground they're nearly on their hands and knees. They make it through unseen so far and Lake waits about fifteen minutes, their cautious drop-crawl pace halting every time they hear plasma fire.

Thompson and the other two reach their vaunted position and Huck makes sure his Jackhammer is good to go. Huck's only got less than a second to pop his head out and loose a rocket so he mentally marks the shade's position based on whatever he can hear.

"Whenever you're ready," Thompson tells him.

Huck takes a deep breath. Then he leaps up, sights, and fires his Jackhammer. The rocket whooshes through the air, but Huck's already down in the grass. They all wait three seconds but it should have hit by now. A distant explosion rumbles nearly six seconds later but that's completely wrong.

They hear the shade's stubborn whine and Thompson yells, "Get the fuck out!"

All three men scatter through the grass and keep low but the way they're so disjointed and all over the place, it's not hard to watch them go. Plasma strafes the dirt all around them, and they just keep crawling back to the line, each man hoping that Covie gun isn't following him.

Lake, back at the trench, bit her lip as she watched the rocket barely graze the shade. It turned and plastered the patch of grass the rocket originated from. Her breath caught when she saw this.

She screams to her people, "Pack of smokes for whoever knocks out that fucking gunner!"

Shield company rises and fires their rifles over the lip; everyone expends their magazines. The shade's still blasting in the distance, but its fire smacks around the trench instead, freeing Huck at least from its dogged pursuit. With a clenched jaw, Lake sees another rocket spit out from the grass, and she tracks it through her scope.

There's a closer boom, and Lake is relieved when the crown of the shade gun (what she can see through the grass) erupts in a swirl of blue and orange fire.

"They did it!" Lake howls. "They fucking did it! Let's go, Shield! Move move move!"

As one, Shield goes over the top. They fire at the hill that rises ever over them, but for once they're unimpeded. Covie carbine fire goes wide, forcing some of them to hit dirt, but spurred on by the short, victorious charge, they get up and keep moving up.

They hit the first ridge where they see the ruins of the shade gun close up. It's split in a few pieces, and its jackal gunner is a mess of steaming meat. The Shield men who pass by take a moment to kick or spit at it before getting into cover. The Covies take pot-shots at the ridge they lost and the men do their best to fire back.

Here Lieutenant Pelton's platoon meets Shield 2nd platoon led by Lieutenant Briar. They come streaking out of the grass, no longer pinned by the damned shade. They exchange pleasantries and take up positions. Thompson and Huck return too, and the warthogs also sneak their way on up and roll to a stop behind the men, their tri-barrelled guns all pointed up the hill.

"Good stuff, Huck," Lake says. "This was all you."

Huck just grunts in reply. He affords himself a cigarette and sits quietly smoking.

"Pinned down," Lieutenant Briar tells Pelton and Lake. He points back that way. "Shade got a few of my people. Ran into a couple of snipers too, but they ain't shooting now. Not the way we all hauled ass getting up here. Couldn't shoot all of us."

"What's the plan now?" Pelton asks.

"I'm still waiting on air-cav," Lake says.

"We dealt with that gun without 'em," Briar says back.

"My people. My people did. I'm not making them go back out there unsupported."

Briar looks at Lake, then at Pelton. "You ain't in charge, girlie. You have Stern on the line, Pelton?"

"He says we go," Pelton says, a little hesitant. He ignores Lake who spins around with a murderous glare.

"Put me on with the captain," Lake says.

Briar mutters, "Ain't your place, Sergeant."

She hears Stern's voice through her helmet comm. system: "Why aren't these men moving, Lieutenant?"

"Captain Stern, this is Sergeant Lake."

Silence, then, "This line's reserved for officers, Lake."

"I'm requesting orders."

"You have your orders. They haven't changed from the start. Get up that hill, Sergeant. Take 449 so 2nd battalion can follow."

"Sword's gone, sir," Lake says. "There isn't going to be pressure from the other side. If the Covenant are waiting for us, they're going to be waiting with all the manpower and firepower they've got. All guns are facing us."

"We got rapidity!" Stern thunders. "We hit them fast and keep hitting themâ€"never give 'em a second to breathe."

"We haven't even winded them once."

In the way that Stern takes in air so deeply like a whiskey-soaked gasp, Lake knows he's done talking to her. Stern turns his attention to Pelton. His voice becomes crackly with static when he yells, "Lieutenant Pelton, if I say you go, god dammit that's what you do! You're in Shield company now! 1st platoon, to boot! It's up to us to set an example, you understand? We go where others can't! Now maybe you're used to sitting around in Charlie company, sitting around like vultures and waiting for better, braver men to die first so you can swoop in and say you helped, but not in my company, Lieutenant! Not in my company! No way!"

Lake covers her mic with her hand. Her voice is a seething rasp. "Don't let him bully you, sir."

Briar spits in the dirt. He hits his radio and says, "I'll do it, sir. I'll lead the way."

"That Briar? God bless you, Lieutenant! God bless you!"

"I've got four warthogs standing by, sir," Pelton says. His face is flushed. Lake looks disappointed.

"Are they going to move, Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir."

"You drive them forward, then! I want to hear all four guns from where I am, Lieutenant! Not one goes silent! You protect Briar's people; 1st platoon goes in next!" Stern says. "Don't radio back until you hit that second ridge! Is that understood? Out!"

Pelton gulps; the exchange has left him weak-kneed. Briar on the other hand is calm. He slaps a full magazine into his rifle and looks coolly at the sergeant.

"Expect to see 1st squad out there in the thick of things, Sergeant Lake."

"Worry about your own people."

Briar grins a repulsive grin, the kind you can feel even after you turn away. It's a stare-down grin, and he's won.

The mortar fire from the bottom of the hill picks up with more

intensity now. When Pelton radios his lead warthog and tells them to get moving, the drivers thrum their engines in a guttural battle cry. They roll into the grass, creaking and growling. Briar sticks two fingers in his mouth and lets out a strident whistle. He mounts the trench lip and 2nd platoon clambers after him. Pelton also motions for 1st platoon to go.

Lake says to her squad, "Keep low. The moment there's shooting, hug dirt."

It starts soon after, and they do drop down—a man up front takes a beam-burst through the gut and he collapses, screaming and tearing at the grass. Briar yells "Shut that man up!" but the tormented crying continues. As if to just get away from the awful sound, the rest of the troops keep forging ahead, sharing panicky looks with each other. The warthogs' chain guns fire over their heads out of beat, stopping and going. Breaking into a run, they last maybe a minute.

A few more slugs punch through the air, hissing, and drill into the mob of advancing men. Bodies fall, and right after, there's a frightening snarl and the vegetation shears in half all around them—streams of plasma come ripping out of the grass, low. As if they are tripped up, the ones who are caught by this tumble and clutch their legs in shock, feeling for limbs that have become jumbles of bloody cloth and tattered flesh.

Bunched up so tightly, Shield begins to lose its cohesion. They're confused when in front and all around they start dropping out of view and screaming—when blood that's not their own kicks up on their uniforms and faces. They feel the unbearable, shark teeth heat that they can't see overtop the waves of grass but still engulfs their skin, gnawing. They hear Briar's wild, shrill voice over the din urging them forward and they are cattle escaping the confines of their pen, their sides groaning with an electric sting. They trample forward and onward.

The crest of the disorderly formation erupts in a turbulent white flash and the men closest to it get knocked around, their clothes set on fire and melting. While they roll around in the dirt and scratch at themselves, the men behind them leap over and keep running while Covie machinegun fire chatters away and doesn't shut up. Another big blast, and a man flies sideways into a group of soldiers; his flailing, windmill form hauls them all down. The men of 2nd platoon are in complete disarray now, charging forwards, sideways, backwards—towards Lake's people and 1st platoon. From her place in the rear, Lake sees the moment where the attack finally stalls: a warthog takes a direct, screeching hit to the hood and the entire vehicle burns up in direct view of the two platoons.

Losing their nerves, the other warthogs begin to take off like frantic horses, dragging their foot-snagged riders to death—the gunner flies out of one and smacks his head on the ground and doesn't move. The Shield men disperse to try and get out of the way and from the grass Lake hears a terrified squeal that is cut short—the succumbing sound of gazing upon oncoming tow-hooks and radiating, white bull's eyes, and knowing you're about to die.

She can't even see the 2nd platoon men who kept going forward, stampeding and confused. They're lying in the dirt now either dead or hanging onto their withered lives vise-like. As one they all cower in

the grass while Covenant mortars go up everywhere, boxing them in, shaking them. They see the fiery green blobs shoot upwards, fired by hands unseen from the grass on the hill, and they count the lingering seconds it takes for them to hit the ground. They're pinned, and Lake thinks now for good.

Then, a familiar and welcome sound carries over the trees they hear coming miles away. It makes them whoop and holler as they turn their heads. Falcons rush on by, one high one low. The breeze that that one kicks up is bliss, warm and giving, and some men raise both hands to the sky and throw their heads back like they are relishing a blessed rain. The ones who don't, they keep down and prostrate in the grass, heads bowed in their own way of reverence. Grenades sown from above cut up the second ridge before them, every magnificent shudder absolution to their suffering ears and bruised bones. The falcons plough the rocky earth, turning everything to healthy, blossoming mush.

And just as quickly, it's all taken away. It was a fleeting glimpse of something unearned, and punishment for their hubris follows; the lower falcon is plucked out of the air when one of its rotors suddenly becomes slag. Bits both hard and liquid shower the men, burningâ€”an Armageddon rain for the deserving and they wonder why they are. Somebody screams "fall back!" and everyone decides that's the best plan. Most of whatever's left of 2nd platoon rushes back past Lake but she stays and watches the falcon spin dizzily and then dive into the grass just over the second ridge.

Thompson's watching too. He looks back at Lake and she knows. The column of smoke rises over his shoulder, twisting in the wind like a question markâ€”a plea. The actual distress call comes a moment later over the radio, but Thompson and Lake and 1st squad are already making their way over to the wreck.

The Covenant on the hill have either fled from the second falcon flying overwatch, its door gunner still randomly peppering 449, or they simply don't see the squad moving up beneath the grass. 1st squad hangs back watching the rear while Lake gets low and approaches the falcon with Thompson, their rifles up and ready. A rotor still whirs, the blades passing near her face as she carefully ducks by and into the battered and twisted troop compartment. It's stuffy and hot, and she finds a wounded crewman still strapped to his seat, unconscious and bleeding. His co-pilot is completely missing from the chopper, but the peacefully empty seat tells Lake a darker story: the man must have bailed in mid-crash, or got out after and made a run for it.

From the grass, Thompson calls out, "Got a man out here!"

"Here too," Lake says back. She unbuckles the harness and drags him out of the wreck.

Thompson has his draped around his shoulder because one leg is badly broken. He's still conscious, though, and he says, "Fell out of the fucker, just about. Thought I'd try to get as far as I could away on thisâ€”probably never would have made it." From his uniform, the surviving man isn't the co-pilot Lake is kind of looking for (Lake is still thinking about where he could have gone but he has probably vanished in the grass like so many others)â€”he's the falcon's crew chief. He says, "Thanks for coming. I'm Harris, by the

way."

"Could've stayed put. It's unfriendly out there," Lake says to him.

"Had to take my chances."

Thompson asks, "What were you running from?"

Lake shoots him an impatient look, but Thompson means it in earnest. Then, they hear the grass move—"there's something heavier than the wind pushing through. Harris' eyes go big and he begins to slur his speech, talking fast: "We gotta get out of here, Sergeant. I'm not staying here. Before we spun out, I had a look on thermal. All right there is crawling with Covies, like you wouldn't fuckin' believe. Foxholes, dugouts. Like burrows. Hundreds of 'em, probably more farther up the hill. These Covies don't fight like regular Covies, that's for damn sure."

Lake gets her rifle into her hands again while Thompson sets Harris down against the side of the falcon with his sidearm drawn. She crouches low and hisses, "Josiah! That you? 1st?"

Thompson pitches a grenade into the grass without waiting for a reply and there's a chirruping caw. Lake fires, and skirmishers explode from their hiding places right before the grenade goes off, jaws and beaks snapping open and shut. Thompson and Harris pick their targets and shoot them down at nearly point blank range, close enough to feel their throaty breaths against their skin as they stumble forward and die. One skirmisher leaps out at Lake and she wrestles it to the ground with a muffled yell. She has one hand wrapped around its neck, keeping it from yanking out her eyes with its barbarian intensity. Thompson runs up and kicks it off, his boot driving as hard as he can into the side of its head. He stumbles, off balance, and he awkwardly sprints on top of it with a grunt of discomfort while Lake jumps up. Thompson throws his full weight on the squawking alien; he pins it down and Lake puts three rapid rounds into it wherever she can—"she misses a couple times, the way it struggles and thrashes under Thompson, but she tallies three and that's enough. Finally it spasms and jerks around a bit, gurgling, until its wicked claws biting into Thompson's fleshy bicep gradually release like he's ripping free of a snagging thorn bush.

"Come on! We gotta go!" Harris screams at them. He's still firing into the grass, trying to keep his pistol as steady as possible—"it jerks his whole arm with every shot.

Thompson nods in agreement and bends to grab hold of the unconscious falcon crewman—"he lets out a hoarse moan and nearly falls over, black spots rippling his vision, when his left arm gives away. The muscles have been impaled pretty seriously and he idly wonders if he'll lose the arm because of it. Lake has seen everything; she tells Thompson, "Don't worry about him, I'll take him! You dismantle that door gun!" Plasma bolts sneeze across the falcon's crumpled body and Lake empties her magazine in the direction they came from.

"How?"

"Get creative!"

Thompson, clutching his wound, crawls into the smoky falcon. Coughing, he yells to Harris, "You got a toolkit around here?"

"Check the aft, in the nettingâ€" Whatever else Harris says is drowned out by Lake's rifle popping off more manic shots.

Thompson rummages and finds a canvas bag. He undoes the strap and rips free a Phillip's head. He clambers back to the door of the troop bay and kneels down beside the bracing of the mounted grenade launcher, taking a moment to look over the design. He sticks the screwdriver where he thinks it goes and twists but there's no purchaseâ€"the inside of the falcon is making his eyes water. He sticks a pinky inside the groove and feels a fucking industrially-welded bolt.

He shrinks back into the troop compartment and desperately looks around for something else to use when he catches a sickly green glint in the grass through the opposite bay door, the outline of a passing jackal slinking around the falcon. Thompson gets out of sight and holds his fucking breathâ€"tells himself to quiet the fuck down. The Phillip's head is still in his slippery hand and he brings it up by his chest.

In between a burst of fire, Lake yells "Pup! What's taking so goddamn long!" and then Thompson hears his heartbeat giving away his position. There is a crunch of hooves on trodden grass and a curious snuffling. Then both of these recede.

Thompson gulps down some air with determination and then he charges outside, screwdriver raised. He planned to plunge the spiky tip through the jackal's skull, but instead he jams it into Sergeant First Class Reed's tough, leathery combat vest. Reed reels back, screwdriver sticking halfway out of his shoulder and wagging around, and Shield Recon nearly guns Thompson down except for Reed stepping in front of the marine sergeant and shouting "Jesus Christ, friendly! All friendly here!" He grabs Thompson by his bandolier to steady him and pushes him against the falcon. A few metres away, Thompson's sought-after jackal lies crumpled on the ground close by the rest of Reconâ€"he never sees or finds out what got it in the end.

Reed motions for his men to circle around and engage the Covenant there. He says to Thompson, "Lake's okay?"

"Think so. We can't stay here."

"Wounded?"

"Two."

"Was talking about you."

"Guess that's three."

Reed tells him, "Head back to the lineâ€"leave the falcon to me. Just concentrate on getting yourself out of here, Pup."

"You know what to do?" Thompson jerks a thumb toward the bird. With its one chopping rotor still in dazed motion, it looks like it's

struggling to get back on its feet, back into the air. The way it's cracked and burning, though, it doesn't know that it'll rest here forever. "Lake says dismantle it."

"That's what I meantâ€”I'll send her off," Reed says. "Now go."

Thompson gathers up his rifle, heads back to Lake and tells her, "Pulling back."

Lake nods, does a final sweep, and finally gets the still-unconscious crewman away from the falcon. Meanwhile Shield Recon, fanned out around the crash site, puts more controlled shots into the surrounding grass. A man from the outfit helps Harris to his feet and they both drag-stumble after Thompson and Lake. Taking turns, keeping their eyes on their six, Reed's men file out of there; Reed is the last one to leave, cantankerously hauling his open, flapping rucksack and rifle down by his sides. Behind the hobbling, snaking line, the falcon violently splits in half and the cockpit window is blown outwards to unleash a baleful fire that shrieks and goes everywhere. They hear but don't see through the smoky pall the screech of alien mortars above, an ugly, sneering noise that sounds that way only because they are in full retreat. Creeping thuds like menacing footsteps hound them all the way back to the first ridge where the men of Shield company bleed and tremble, wide-eyed or with their eyes shut tight.

#

Captain Stern disembarks from a warthog that pulls up to the first ridge where Shield rests, withered and stalled. While everyone hunkers down in the mire, he walks down the line with a carefree step, helmet under one arm. The men watch the grass, flinching with every windy shake, and cast catatonic stares over their shoulders while Stern passes by; he grunts with muted disapproval like he's hearing the languid mention of inadequate offspring he disowned, and continues walking until he reaches SFC Reed, Lake, and his two lieutenants. The marine Thompson lingers nearby, not privy to this meeting. Arm bandaged, he sits in the grass and twists a weed around his thumb, looking blank.

"Hill's un-takeable, sir," Reed tells Stern. "That's the truth."

"I'd advise against speaking out of turn, Sergeant."

"You'll hear the same story from the others," Lake says. "Ask any man."

Stern looks over lieutenants Pelton and Briar, but they too kick at the dirt and agree with the most diplomatic of head nods. Stern's glare falls directly on Briar, but he's as quiet as the rest of them, sucking on a cigarette. There's a smear of 2nd platoon blood across his cheek and a trampled dullness in his eyes that didn't used to be there.

"It's un-takeable with what we got now," Reed says. "The area's too wide for one company. Mortars aren't hitting shit, and that's not Charlie's fault. Not totally. There's too much we can't see."

"Crew chief we pulled out of the falcon told us beyond that second ridge, Covies are hiding in foxholes all the way up 449," Lake says. "We'll be surrounded, even if we manage to break through."

"Short of carpet bombing the entire hill, there's not much we can do on the offense," Reed adds.

"Set fire to itâ€"watch 'em burn, I say," Briar says, mumbling through his cigarette. He looks up to the washed-out sky that's getting darker and darker. "Rain'll clean up the mess, douse the flames when we're done."

"And you?" Stern asks Pelton. "What's your take on all this?"

Pelton glances at Lake before telling Stern, "1st platoon won't make it to the second ridge if something doesn't change. I won't order them across this time."

That so? Stern says only with his damp, wrung-out looking face. He turns from the lieutenant, who lets out a silent breath, and says, "It'd make our job easier, wouldn't it? Letting our boys in the sky blow 'em all up, and we can keep our dainty toes out of the mud. Only there's a problem with that, and it's that our friends 10th Air-Cav are unhappy with how things are going. Losing one falcon is grounds to give up the fight, according to the 10th OIC. He made one thing clear, and that's his people don't fly until we clear 449 of ack-ack. That too is gonna be an issue because we can't knock out emplacements if we can't see 'emâ€"especially if these Covies are using small-arms. Thing is he says Shield needs to go in first, while the rest of you are saying it's Air-Cav that needs to. So we're at a standstill, folks." Lake doesn't think Stern looks displeased with 10th's reluctance to flyâ€"she thinks he never wanted them along anyway, that Stern couldn't be happier that the Covies killed a falcon. "449 needs to be takenâ€"in spite of insistence that it can't be doneâ€"and soon. I am open to suggestions because it's getting late; Shield's gotta move somewhere, if not forward."

"And not backwards?" Reed says.

"No way. We've made it this far, we're not giving up this ground. It's not a bad position to holdâ€"better if it were the second ridge, but not a bad position. We'll make it work. You'll see."

"So that leaves the left and right flanks," Reed says.

Briar says, "Ain't keen on heading on through the jungle. Not where Sword bought it."

"How bad was it?" Stern asks Reed.

"Massacre, sir. Can't be too sure there aren't any survivors, but it sure doesn't look that way. Whatever happened happened quick. Some tried to runâ€"didn't make it far. Most of the boys were still on the road, they never got a chance to get to cover," Reed says. "Best as I could tell, grenades knocked out the warthogs, trapping 'em in place, then Sword took it from sniper fire coming from all directions. It was coordinated if I ever saw coordination before."

There's a sickening light Lake sees that comes into Stern's eyes when Reed shrinks into his story. He doesn't look ecstatic that the Covies

slaughtered 906th men, but there's something greedy in the way he gorges on the details Reed dredges up. Something more than rapt attentionâ€”there's too much damn thinking all over Stern's face. Planning ahead like how a murderer thinks it through days before the deed, fantasizing.

"So you won't lead the assault up 449, Briar?" Stern asks.

"Not like this. Not without air support," he replies.

"Then I suppose the only options we got left are this way and that." Stern points left and right of the hill. "And Shield is not sitting still."

"Both ways could wipe us out, sir," Reed says. "And for what?"

"Already went over this, Sergeant. 112th's still waiting."

"Maybe. Think I know how they think, the 112th. A crack outfit like thatâ€”and trust that I been alongside a few of themâ€”if they can't be found it's a good possibility they don't want to be."

"So, what, LeFae's sending us on a goose chase?"

"Could be they were out here once. A week's a long time, though."

"You think they're dead."

"Or they aren't. Might even be another reason why the spook wants them found."

Stern ponders this a momentâ€”they all do. It's preposterous but not unheard of, bands of rogues or deserters. Stern says anyway, "Either we find them or we don't. That comes later. All that I care about is beating that storm up the hill. We do it for those who couldn't or can't continue the struggle. They got us this far; it's only right."

His words rub against the nape of Lake's neck. They're hollow words that sound electric and probably crackle because the others nod their heads solemnly or twitch, but Lake doesn't. Stern gave that order to chargeâ€”they can't turn back now because it'd be for nothing, that ritual sacrifice; blood fed to the yearning grass a tithe to traverse the tolling passage that spit them back out. He's a preacher.

"We're going through the jungle," Stern continues. He has his folded-over map in his hands, a holy tool he usesâ€”abides by. He's so wrapped up in topographical lines like verse, it's all he sees. "We'll forge through the left flank. We'll go extra wide, try to get around any ambush that might be waiting for us."

"We're at less strength than Sword was going in," Reed says. "Recon will go in first. Make sure the route's clear."

"We go in with everybody. Shield doesn't sit around."

"It's suicide," Lake says. Reed bites his tongue for her.

"As for reinforcements, I've spoken to Captain Alleyâ€"I'm pulling men from Charlie. They'll assist in the manoeuvre," Stern says, unimpeded. "Elements from Dog company are coming up from HQ bearing supplies and equipment. They'll stay until the hill's ours. Any questions?"

Everybody has some. Nobody asks them. They stare at the mud, steal looks at each other underneath Stern's nose-up glare.

"Then we move in one hour. Dismissed." Before they all walk in separate directions, Stern reaches out towards Pelton and says, "A minute, Lieutenant."

They move to the rear of the line, away from the rest of the men, and Stern tells him, "You performed fine out there, Ben."

Pelton says nothing.

"I'm relieving you of your command of 1st platoon."

"I understand, sir."

"You like Charlie company, don't you? Those are your boys. You'll stay on the line with them here. Back with your people again."

"Thank you, sir."

"Through no fault of your own, Benâ€"you didn't do anything wrong. It was a tough order to carry out, I know that. Shield company just needs a different kind of soul than yours. A man like Briar, you see, he's got zeal! That's what I need in this unit. What we're fighting, Ben, is a crusade of wills. We've got to be able to go all in because they areâ€"by God they are! They've got no qualms with that sort of thing. It's in their culture; in their blood, that drive. You've seen it. I have too. If they weren't killing us with it, you almost have to admire it, that readiness to die for what they believe, and man, they are some goddamned believers! And even now, even so, it's something you can't take from them as hard as you try. You'd never know they're demoralized, the way they keep coming. Maybe we show that kind of fortitude too but I don't knowâ€"hard to tell from here sometimes. If we don't, we should. Because what are we without spirit, Ben? Nothing."

"Of course, sir," Pelton says. "I'm sorry, sir."

This makes Stern pause, and in a rare admission to Pelton that makes the lieutenant feel like he's suddenly trespassing, he tells him, "No, I'm sorry, Ben. You're a fine soldier, I'm sure. It was me. I dug myself a hole. Filled it up behind me, I was that confident. So deep and so dark, only way out is to hit China. That's the only way out. We'll keep going. We'll break through soon. Soon."

"Who'll replace me?" Pelton asks after a while.

"I don't know yet."

"If you'll have it, I'll put in a recommendation for Sergeant Lake. She's a good man, Captain."

"I'll take it into consideration," Stern says. "Thanks, Ben."

"Good luck, sir."

They shake hands, and Pelton heads back towards the line. Stern stands around for a bit, staring all the way up Hill 449 as if he's reaffirming his devotion to the path he dictated himself. They are grim, nervous eyes he can pop out and keep hidden in his pocket when he wantsâ€”he will again when he returns to the men on the ridge but for now he allows them to remain seeing and seen. Nobody notices, though. He's always alone.

Sergeant Lake sits in the grass beside Thompson who's smoking and still garrotting his fingertip with a weed. She left without saying anything to Reed but she can't avoid him forever inside this tiny bubble of hushed men and the sergeant first class eventually approaches the two. He does it like he doesn't want to and both Lake and Thompson know why.

"How are you two doing?" Reed asks.

"Still alive, aren't we?" Lake says.

"Yeah."

"So who isn't?" she asks. "That's why you're here, right?"

The utilitarian swipe of his hand is mechanical and without any more delay because he's done it lots before: Reed reaches into his mag pouch, something clinks against something else, and he withdraws a fist with three tags. He has to sort them out and untangle them before giving one to Lake and two to Thompson; they belonged to Captain Moyer (his tags still say Lieutenant) and the marines Putnam and Meagre. They stare at them in their hands.

"Sorry," Reed says.

Thompson tells him, "Thanks, Reed. For doing this."

Lake also nods her thanks, but then she gets to her feet. For a minute she looks like she's lost, like she wandered into the wilderness for a moment and only now realizes she took a wrong turn someplace back there. Thompson and Reed don't know whether to leave her alone or get her to sit back down, if she's about to fall over or not. She takes off soon after and just walks in a muddled line away, thankfully, from the front.

"That's roughâ€”about your pals," Reed says to Thompson after lighting a cigarette. He takes a seat too while they stare at the sky slipping into indigo above the wafting grass. "They weren't part of your squad, were they?"

"My squad's headed home," Thompson says. "Those boys were from George company. Maybe some of the last surviving few. Don't know what the number's like now."

"God dammit." Reed feels like it's respectful to shake his head while saying this. They share smoke and loathing for a moment. "Did you know them well?"

"Probably the same as how you knew Sword company." Thompson holds up the marines' tags. "Reed, this is two. Nobody's brought up the hundred on your side of things to your face. Isn't right for me to be moping when I'm a passenger in this."

"We're all damn passengers in this."

"Well I've had my time to grieve, at any rate. Mourned for Fifth well enough."

"Hell did you have time to grieve? You been fighting for your life ever since you got here. Covie's been hounding you day and night," Reed says. "You haven't grieved for shit."

"Fifth will be strong again, and the idea of that pleases me more than you know. If that's it, if it ends with them, the only thing left to do is rebuild."

Neither of them say, but that's not it. Putnam and Meagre were not it. Thompson's still around and for how much longer Reed doesn't even want to tempt by thinking about. Man talks like he's disembodied, like it's already over for him. He's among those left behind in the valley; he's already buried himself. Probably eulogized and grieved for himself while he was grieving for Fifth, getting all of it out of the way, all at once. Reed's talking to a ghost who's whittled down and already laid to rest. He's indistinguishable from the Sword company men that Reed remembers lying in piles, and for a moment Reed is jealous.

"Still think this fight isn't yours?" he hears Thompson say, like he's testing him. "Got a reason clearer than any other now? Do you find you believe?"

Reed doesn't say anything or look over. He doesn't know if Thompson really said all that.

There's this stiff opening where there's no sound and Reed tromps in after much contemplation, the kind of firm march that brings his knees to his chest: "You still thinkin' about dying?" he asks.

"When it's convenient," Thompson says.

"You comforted by it? By what's after?"

"Haven't thought about that much."

"I don't think I believe you."

"I don't need an after to get what I want."

"What's in the first part that's so great?" Reed says. "That makes everybody go crazy for it? It's a disease—contagious and airborne. You been around it two weeks, probably longer. I have too. What is it you want? Peace?"

"No such thing as a peaceful exit out here," Thompson says. "A good death doesn't mean peaceful, not to people like you and me. You know that. Why're you asking, Reed? What's got itself into your head?"

"I told you I never wanted to get too invested, too caught up," Reed says. "When I was out there, I sat with those dead boys in Sword."

"You want the Covenant to answer for that."

"Good enough reason to want some kind of retribution, I guess. Make 'em hurt. But also I found myself thinkin', fuckin' waste. Them who died. Played kind of a part," Reed says to Thompson. "Think I see you feel the emptiness in death. It's a dour fuckin' thing and you're okay with that. You bleed, you're bleeding for a reason and it isn't absolution, 'least not the universal sense of it. You die, that's it for you."

"Yeah."

"Amazes me."

Thompson doesn't reply, just listens.

"Didn't see beauty in it, Sword, not like how they want you to. Didn't see beauty and I tried. Lying there, they were lostâ€"wandering. Feel like I want them to get to the place they're going, even if I don't know where that is. But I want it to existâ€"something at least, waiting. Might give this whole thing purpose for being the way it is, so terrible. I mean not for myself, that place, but for them's who need it. Everybody's got their reason, right? I'm hoping for the best for 'em, hoping maybe they're right. Hope they got what they wanted."

Thompson finally says, "If I die, it'd be for them." He gestures spaceward and Reed imagines he's thinking about the strong-chinned ships carrying his marine unit safely home, his battered, bleeding boys. "And it'd be for youâ€"your people here on the line. That is a worthy sacrifice, isn't it? It'd be right, I think. Proper."

"Pup, don't you dare do it for us 'cause you think we'd look to it fondly," Reed snaps. "Already got enough people getting killed for no good goddamn reason."

Thompson says nothing for a while. Then he rises and starts in the direction Lake stumbled off to. He says, "I'm gonna check on the sergeant."

"Should probably give her space," Reed warns.

Lake didn't walk far, just ducked into the trees farther down the hill where she thought they couldn't hear her. Here she stooped, hands on her gut and across her mouth, and let out something worse than irrepressible vomitâ€"a sob, feral and forbidden. She said she wouldn't. She said it over and over and over she wouldn't.

When Thompson finds her, he doesn't intrude because she shouldn't be intruded upon. She's mourning the loss of Moyer, he knows. He slides down a few respectful metres away and forces himself to hear. It's a terrible sound that's coming from Lake, her grief barbed with a deeper kind of anguish because she's bearing it all by herselfâ€"because she feels the need to. She can't share it with the people under her command, she especially. She doesn't have that privilege, she's been told over and over and over.

This is loss, Thompson determines. Loss not perverted by utility. Lake isn't crying because the unit is missing an officer; she isn't crying because she is expected to show outrage at the goddamned Covenant for taking him; she's crying because she simply feels the lack. Of Moyer, the things that made him real to her: the movement of his fingertips, his summertime eyes that glowed a sunburn orange and said yes, I livedâ€"she could feel his life then, wonderful and glorious and pulsing. No more. This is loss. It is stripped of layers of feeble justification (he died a soldierly death); it is the raw, painful way someone misses another.

Thompson wishes he could stay here with Lake but he feels Putnam and Meagre, restless, tugging at his sleeves, urging him to get back to the line. He doesn't deserve this respite. He deserves to die, like them.

#

Stern decides on 1st platoon's new CO: Nehrada Atwal from Charlie company. She's already a lieutenant, so someone in her old platoon will be getting a promotion. When she transfers, she nearly dismantles her company because Stern asked her to take with her any willing men to serve as replacements in Shield. It's a calculated move on the captain's part; for the chance to be a part of Stern's fighting unitâ€"the illustrious Shield company, by God!â€"there are more than enough volunteers and some disappointed men are even turned away. The original Shield members treat these newcomers icily, as if they are a different breed, these bastard adoptees, but now the company is full up again and it's as if they never lost a single man.

Elements from Dog company arrive in pelicans and start working on the ridge, digging in with shovels and pickaxesâ€"a forward trench for machinegun emplacements and infantry, then support trenches and mortar pits. They bring up new warthogs for Shield company to hop into, fresh water, and fresh supplies. Headed back, the pelicans load up the wounded and dead Shield soldiers togetherâ€"the wounded men put up with the dead smell, anything to get off the line and back to HQ.

Stern watches them go with what looks like a sneer like they wasted his time and this is what they get, the goddamn slackers. He's got a rifle underneath his arm and it looks so odd there, like he's holding it for someone else. But he's leading from the front this timeâ€"he's no coward. He's no coward.

While Lake secures her things inside her warthog, she looks out at Thompson who's staring up at the top of Hill 449. It towers above him, insurmountable and black, sucking up the last of the light behind it. There's a groan of thunder that seems to shoot up from the dirt, something trying to thrash its way out of a tomb under this desecrated ground and vibrations grip her ankles. She smells the warm, rising smell of rain about to descend on them, Stern's warning like prophesy. But she also doesn't forget Thompson's warning, his urging and his worry, that this hillâ€"and all that it should bringâ€"is just death. He turns his head and sees Lake, gives her a look of skeletal longingâ€"she knows what he's longing for. He would climb that black hill if she wasn't there to stop him. She doesn't break her stare because she thinks he'll slip away if she does. But

it chills her when she doesn't see somebody lost in his eyes, but instead a man more determined to be set free and you, his gaze stabs, you are my shackler. You, his gaze stabs again, are the one in a stupor and can't see. What do you know? What is it you think you know? She knows what he wants. She doesn't know what she wants. It is just him watching her now, but he is one of them, maybe. She knows they watch her and they wait for her to fuck up. They have hungry eyes like Stern's.

Dog company waves goodbye to Shield a second time when they head off the line towards the jungle. There aren't enough warthogs so most of them move on foot with the vehicles bringing up the front and the rear of the convoy. They march for what seems like an hour, all following a pair of taillights that bounce up and down in the dark. Branches snag their uniforms and whip across their faces. Weeds and roots do their best to trip them up, they're unruly and troublesomeâ€”this valley is troublesome.

The first plasma bolt streaks across the trail high and stray like a territorial warning shot, a rocking-chair snarl from some hick shotgun. The leaves are so bushy some men don't even see it shining in the night but it's there and gone, and those who did see it instantly run for cover. The rest of the company imitate them more out of confusion; they leap to either side of the trail and lie down. There are fallen trees or natural depressions that some soldiers crawl behind and into. Stern jumps from his warthog and stomps up and down the trail, shouting at his people to stand the hell up. The next shot is from a carbine that just misses Stern but give him some credit, he stays resiliently cool under fire. He faces where the shot came from and he thrusts a hand towards there and howls out to Shield, "Shoot back, god dammit!"

The warthog gunners spray down the jungle they can't really see; their tracers rocket through the dark at all angles, crisscrossing, bouncing viciously off the dirt ground and wide trees. Someone swears he sees a green glow up above and turns his gun on the tangled treetopsâ€”the canopy rips apart and frosty moonlight breathes through the gash like a relieved sigh. The company non-coms scramble onto the trail and wave their men to come forward and fire their weapons. The men don't know what they're shooting at so they shoot where the LAAG gunners shoot.

One man, a replacement from Charlie, gets hit; he made a dash for cover behind one of the warthogs and partway there they get him twice. Carbine rounds spurt through the back of his vest, knocking him over into the ditch behind the trail. He lies there, gasping; it's too dark where he is and some men have to forage through the bushes on their hands and knees to find him.

When a gunner's head whips back and he falls across the roll bar and starts to bleed all down the windshield in front of everyone, Stern points at the man nearest to him and tells him to get up onto that gun there. The soldier hesitates and looks at his squad mates but everyone looks down or into the jungle and keeps on firing and then Stern yells "Get fuckin' moving!" so he does. He's shaking so bad somebody needs to help him climb into the truck bed, shoving his useless legs up and over one at a time, and once he's behind the gun he throws up a little down the front of his collar. He starts shooting but stops a few seconds later because plasma hits the warthog and a brilliant, smouldering glob smears across his armâ€”he

drops the grips of the gun like he's been stung. He screams and thrashes and when his squad mates tug him from the truck bed and help him down to the ground he says over and over, "I did what he said, didn't I? Can't nobody say I didn't do it!"

Stern crouches down and pats him on the shoulder while medics trot over and he tells him he was no coward. SFC Reed taps one of his own men on the back of his helmet and orders him to get on the vacant gun. Better nerves, this Recon man has, and he hops behind the LAAG without question, gets low and puts rounds downrange.

Reed sidles over and says to Stern, "This is a bad spot, sir. Completely out in the openâ€"they'll try to get around us if they don't just pick us off from there."

"You see where those shots are coming from, Reed? Well I do! I see 'em!" Stern says back. "Flanking move worked! They're wild shots, Reed! They're wild animals, got their claws out at us! We'll take a few scratches but we got them on the defensive now! Only a matter of time before they fold!"

"And how long will that be?" This is all Reed says before he purses his lips. Despite what you think, Stern, we are finiteâ€"this company of ours. We can be wiped out. I know that now.

Stern calls lieutenants Atwal and Briar to where he is and they get down behind the warthog. He tells them, "Covies are putting on a lightshow for us. Look out there. Where are those shots going? Maybe we got them suppressedâ€"can't let that go to waste. We'll surround 'em and wipe them out. I need about twelve men to head aroundâ€"anyone you choose. Briar? Atwal?"

Lieutenant Briar is still quiet. He moves with a downtrodden shabbiness about him like he's drunk, the life sucked from him. He's moved this way since the failed charge earlier. When Stern looks at him now, he stares at the ground and refuses to give up any namesâ€"like he's being interrogated. Like he's got something to hold onto that Stern wants to take. Briar was there from the start of Shield company. He knew the men he led today, heard their betrayed cries all around him as he lay in the wet, red sorghum grass that seeped into his uniform and stained it. He drowned in it.

Atwal, the newcomer, looks to her people like they are playing cards. Theirs are plastic faces and numbers; they have a system of comparative worth and it is a strategic gamble, this manoeuvre, so she chooses a safe choice from her hand: "I'll send 1st squad, sir. They'll be more than enough to get the job done." There is no real malice in her watery brown eyes, she has just heard the stories of Shieldâ€"she has bought into Stern's version of Shield: accomplishers of incredible things during training. Oh, the stories she heard! They are why she is here, leading the platoon. 1st squad, Lake's squad, has had zero casualties so far in this fight, and that's what she heard before taking over the platoon. That's why she's sending them through the darkened jungleâ€"they are battle-tested now. She wants to please Stern.

At the mention of 1st squad, Reed says quickly to Stern, "I volunteer to take Recon around, sir. Leave 1st squad on the line. We're more useful out there than stuck here."

Lieutenant Atwal frowns. She doesn't like being second-guessed. Neither does Stern, so in his way he sticks up for her; he tells Reed, "Lieutenant's made her decision, Sergeant. Lake's fully capable of leading 1st squad in this."

"I don't mind, Reed," "I'll do it." Lake is nearby; she's heard everything.

"Lake..."

"I don't mind."

"We'll cover you with smoke," Stern says. "You move into position and the moment I hear you shooting, we'll all press in. That clear? We don't give the Covies a moment to breathe."

Reed just looks at Lake but she doesn't look at him. He doesn't know what's changed. Briar, Lake, Thompson, they're all just husks walking around. Reed doesn't want her out there how she is but Lake moves past him and begins to gather up her squad and Stern stands in his way, indomitable. So Reed heads down the column of troops and warthogs still putting sporadic return fire into the trees and finds Thompson. He says to him, "Lake's been called up. She isn't taking Moyer's death so well."

"I know," Thompson says.

"I'm worried."

Thompson looks down the trail. "Did I miss 'em?"

"You keep her head down out there," Reed says. "Keep her safe, Pup. I mean that."

"I'm not sure that I can, Reed."

Reed grabs Thompson's arm. "This isn't about you. If you die before she does," "In the glare of some headlights, Reed sees the bandage he tugged on," "it's dripping. "Jesus! Pup! You shoulda gotten the fuck out of here."

"You might be right about that."

Reed looks back over at Lake and Stern, unsure of what to do now. Thompson starts off, struggling a little to pull his rifle from his shoulder. Reed walks a step ahead of him and mutters, "Just drop the damn thing. You shouldn't be going. Should be me."

But it's not his decision to make. Soon Stern says go, and a handful of men chuck smoke grenades as far as they can. The thick clouds boil over and spill through the jungle, shimmering, almost blinding, where there are beams of direct light, and on Stern's order, Shield company hastily opens fire all down the line for a brief mad minute. The incoming plasma fire falls away, and there's a hush that's so complete after Stern orders them to stop, it's like they killed them all already. They watch the bulging smoke, rifles poised.

"Sergeant Lake, get moving, please," Lieutenant Atwal says.

There's a sound like wind nudging past foliage that only Reed is sure

he heard. He says urgently, "Wait. Stop." Lake does, and Atwal shoots Reed with an impatient glare, but he remains still, listening.

Then the splash of a puddle strikes the entire company and it sounds like glass shattering, it's so jagged they all feel it.

Reed shouts for everyone to take cover and a volley of plasma bolts and carbine fire slams into the column of warthogs or whizzes past overhead. Some men cry out from the agonizing heat or the burns they suffer when plasma kicks up all around them. Then the Covies come out from the smoke screaming, all of them just screaming. They unleash their throaty wails and screeches and thunder forward, firing right up close only metres away.

Recon, at Reed's say so, all hurl grenades into the smoke at staggered distances. They snatch up their rifles and hold the line as the detonations tear through the jungle. So full of hate, they come with claws and teeth and Covie rifle-butts.

Shield company fires in desperate bursts but half of them need to reload. The others switch to full-auto and rend the oncoming force for about a second before the weight of it crashes into the armoured column and the positions before it. Lake and Thompson get low and unload on whatever; the skirmishers who bound on top of the warthogs—"they're shot down and they roll off, claws grabbing for and slashing at nothing. One takes a gunner out with him, tackling him off the truck bed and they both crash into the ditch behind the trail. They hear the soldier choking out and screaming "Help me! Help me! He's fucking killing me!" and some men jump in after him and begin to kick and pound the jabbering skirmisher with the butts of their rifles until it crawls off shakily and tries to scramble on out of the ditch, but they pull it back down with them and break its bones. They're so frenzied and caught up in the chaotic beating, they're all shouting and sobbing. They can't help it.

There's an elite officer in the middle of the charge, holding his sword high above his head and howling as he rushes towards them doggedly. With one huge swing, he hews the head off a soldier caught out in the open, running back to the warthogs. The elite, so full of hate that it came to kill them with its monster hands, keeps racing towards Reed's men—"keeps screaming. The red blood on its moonlit helmet trickles down its awful, flapping squid jaw.

Its plating crackles and sparks as rifle fire flits off its shield. Reed keeps shooting until all he thinks about is the round that's finally going to take it down, but the way the crazed squid is soaking up his ammunition, Reed worries that that bullet won't be found in one of his mag pouches. The elite ignores the men ducked down in the low bushes before the trail and charges right up to the warthogs. It doesn't get any farther because a stream of gleaming needles sputters out from the line, sticks into its chest, and magenta fire a moment later gushes from its split ribcage. Reed doesn't see him, but he knows it was Horowitz who killed the elite—"he found the kid a couple full magazines of the stuff earlier, taken from the cut down jackal troops on the riverbed.

Even though the Covie officer is gone, the skirmishers and jackals continue to stumble forward out of the smoke until there's a mounting, dead pile of them all the way up to the trail and the warthogs there. Every so often another will appear, dragging its

feet, and almost wait to be killed by Shieldâ€”they've just stopped firing altogether now, given up. All that's left are the rifle cracks from the line but even these are beginning to peter out when no more show up, and then there is just silence except for those buzzing and chirping jungle noises, continuing as if tonight was a calm, breezy evening like any other.

Shield dazedly regroups and the men breathe in and out together, the short, fierce Covie charge having shaken them all. They ask each other if they are doing okay, and they reply they are a few times, as if they don't quite believe it themselves. The medics work on the groaning wounded and grimace quietly. One man kind of walks around mumbling "Jesus... Jesus... Jesus..." to himself and anyone nearby who'll listen. Captain Stern speaks with his lieutenants, clutching his rifle underneath his arm. He was right up there with the men, putting down Covies. Everyone saw him.

Reed, meanwhile, approaches the deflated body of the Covie officer and shoves it with a toe. It's limp, of course, but Reed stares down at it, at its face and squid jaw that has gone restfully slack and he asks it, "What'd you get out of that, you son of a bitch?"

Then from the smoke comes, carried on belaboured night gusts, the rhythmic sound of impactâ€”the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. They come at unpredictable intervals, the silence unperturbed by anyone from Shield listening. There's a metallic ringing sometimes that accompanies the blow. Shield company gets back into cover and readies its weapons, their hearts all thumping too fast.

A rifle shot barks out and Stern roars, "Hold your fire!" Everyone looks at each other and repeats the order down the line, but Reed comes over to Stern, keeping low, and tells him the shot didn't come from us. It was in there. He motions into the smoke. There is another blast, then another. This time they see muzzle flash for a second. Stern seems confused, but there is nothing Shield can do but waitâ€”the smoke is already beginning to curl and dilute, the night winning through again in patches.

There is a flutter of movement and everyone sees what is definitely a person strolling towards them. They understand what the noise they heard earlier was when this stranger stands over a quivering, bleeding jackal, raises a sledgehammer high in the air and brings it down on its face. It lands, but the first blow doesn't always kill (just shatters teeth and skin)â€”it takes another to pulverize the skull and the moment before is achingly long and painful to watch. Everyone jumps at the shocking sound. Nobody seems to breathe after this.

It's a woman who comes near, dragging her pulpy hammer; they see her yellow hair pulled back behind an impromptu, olive headband and they are surprised. She's imposingly tall, the kind of build that makes her lumber instead of walk. When she heads right into the line and passes by the Shield men who stand aside to let her through, Reed can see why she looks so bulky. Overtop her combat vest, there are steel plates welded together that form a sort of heavy cuirass across her torso and Reed can recognize markings that usually go on the outside of an HEV pod.

The first thing she says is: "You're not marines. A lot of dead marines we found." She has a brogue that's both coarse and cursive;

she talks in languorous, deliberate sentences, and everyone clings to each word that seems to hum at the end. She stops in front of Reed and asks suspiciously, "Who are you?"

Stern walks over and says to her "We're with the 906th. The Highwayman. I'm Captain Stern."

She doesn't even turn to look at him. "Never heard of you."

"What's your name, trooper?"

"Boadicea," she replies, savouring the husky word like she's releasing it into the air in a thick, wafting puff. "That's what m' mates have taken to calling me, over the years. I am captain of these Rifles here."

Reed doesn't take his eyes from hers (they're big and cloudy eyes that can abduct you if you're not careful) but everyone else turns to see about a platoon of men emerging from the dying wisps of smoke. Dressed similarly to their CO, they look like thick mountain people with unshaven faces and ratty uniforms and mismatched gear. Some wear full-faced helmets, others berets, their leering faces black with dark grease so only their teeth show. Rifle blasts still go off intermittently towards the rear of their very incoherent formation, and these shots ring and waver and sound deathly.

"We are the 112th, Captain Stern," Bo tells him. "We are ODS." "

At the mention of the lost 112th, some exhausted grins break out among the men of Shield company. They clap each other on the shoulders. Found them, they smile.

"Well thank god," Stern says. "We've been lookin' for you" "all of you. We got orders to get your people back to HQ, so whenever you're ready" " "

"We are not leaving, Captain," Bo says slowly, amused, like she just heard a stale joke.

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody is leaving. Not you, not me, not any of our people. We've had a few setbacks, and we are fewer, yes, but everything is working in our favour once more, Captain. We've been tracking these Covenant for hours" "this was a scouting party you beat up. The rest are on the move through this jungle, marching south-east from here. Hundreds strong in a column that's miles long, with light armour and weapons crews toting big, big guns as well. I assume you've got men posted south-east from here. Is that correct?"

With a start, Reed speaks up. "They're headed around Hill 449" "sir, they're going to encircle Dog and Charlie. We have to get back and help."

"You willnae do such a thing, Sergeant," Bo snaps. "As I said, nobody is leaving."

"They'll be overrun. Slaughtered."

Stern says to the woman captain, "All right, you listen up" " "

"T'is our deaths, or theirs," she says. She looks at both of them, shifting her sticky gaze from man to man. "You will help me, Sergeant, Captain, because our mission is vitalâ€”the cause more than just. Such a duty demands blood be shed, but we are already anemic, we few. If we're to face a veteran battalion of Covenant on this, they will decimate us, cut us down to the last man. But if we succeed, do what needs be doneâ€”without hindranceâ€”we will them. We will devastate them. This is my promise."

The way her wild-looking men march up to Shield, pressing in and suffocating with their statures and slightly raised rifles, Reed doesn't believe this wild-looking woman, Boadicea, would let any of them go if they wanted.

#

They follow Boadicea (her men call her Bo) and the 112th Helljumpers through the jungle, all of Shield and its replacements, and she leads them to an abandoned mineshaft that was probably out of use long before the war. There's a dusty gift shop near the entrance and everything is boarded or gated up. Before the hike, she and her men made each Shield soldier surrender their radio equipment and she sliced the transmitters off their helmets with her Helljumper knife. Stern was the only one who was allowed to keep his intactâ€”he and Boadicea walked at the head of the group and spoke to each other, and by the end of it he told her he wouldn't raise anyone on the radio and he meant it. That worried Reed.

Some of the men from the 112th stand guard around a thick gate that seals off the shaft but Bo takes them right through and they file down the musty tunnel. She tells the men to get comfortable anywhere they'd like, then she, Stern, and Reed (she requested the sergeant to join her specifically) all enter an antechamber off to the side.

She lights a tired kerosene lamp and wordlessly orders both men to sit at a scratched up, museum-piece picnic bench that's also here and they doâ€”they take a seat and tuck in their legs meekly while she circles the antechamber. With a click and a pull of a strap, her armour plates fall to the cavern floor and clatter like a juggling accident of pots and pans. Freed of this weight, she stretches out and joins the two Shield men at the bench. The lamp rattles and nearly goes out when she plunks down.

"This one has doubts," Bo says to Stern while motioning towards Reed. "I can see it in that dour little face."

"He just needs to hear the reasoning. He needs convincingâ€”like I did," Stern says. "Go on, though. He's listening."

"The mission," Bo says, "is not a complicated one. It'll be considerably less difficult, now that you're all here. We could've done it two weeks ago with the strength we had then, one whole company of ODSTsâ€”my company. They were tough, hard boys, but a week of this fighting weeded the weak from the tough; and the second cut the tough from the unbreakable. We're still standing, 's you can see. All that's left from two-hundred pairs of boots that rained from that starry, starry night."

"What went wrong?" Reed asks.

"Someone had misjudged the troop deployments of the Covenant underneath the canopyâ€"was blind like us, pretending he wasn't. But it wasn't him shooting towards the surface. The moment we landed, when the doors blew open, they threw themselves upon us. There were boys who died still buckled into their seats, died with their rifles' safeties still on. We were supposed to land quiet, hit hard, and make it back to friendly territoryâ€"all before dawn. We could do none of those things, the way it was so completely fucked from the start. We were cut off from the marine division, so we set out to find this rusty old haunt we knew was here." Her eyes graze the low ceiling. "The Covenant haven't come knockingâ€"down here they cannot track us. We are ghosts."

"5th Armoured lost a lot of people looking for you," Reed says.

"They bungled through the bush, the marines. Big tanks, loud guns. They had all the Covenant come down on them and us, so much so that I lost half my Rifles trying to link up with those boys in green. They were never there when they were supposed to beâ€"always fell a little short while we waited so patiently. And then there was just Covenant all over, and we fought and died getting back here to the mineâ€"four times this happened. We were weary of it, coming back to these tunnels lesser and lesser each time. The toll it takes on you I'm sure you have an understanding of the same as I do, Sergeant."

Reed just stares at her.

She continues, "We believe in the mission and we do not fear death, any of us. Even if we fail, there is no greater way to pass on through than how we're choosing to."

"And the mission?"

"Is what it's always been about, this war," Bo says. "Killing Covenant. Taking from those sons of bitches a thousand times over what was taken from us."

"If you're out to kill Covie, not much we can do crawling around in the dark, jumping at shadows. We should've pushed backwards. Could've beaten 'em back to the hillâ€"failing that, HQ," Reed says. "Think we could've. Then regrouped. Set out again with a force much larger, more armoured, than what we've got nowâ€"we're a damn raggedy group. If this really does mean as much to you as you say."

"They will surround us and crush us when they catch up. You're not making it back to your people until I say we're done here, and I swear it's for the benefit of the men we're sheltering right now. Your Shield company."

"Sir," Reed says to Stern, "you realize once 449 fallsâ€"what's left of Charlie and Dog on the ridge, a hundred men between 'em maybeâ€"we'll be cut off from HQ. All Covie's got to do is push down and remove us from Cassandra for good. We're too fragmented already. But if we all rally at HQ, we can weather an attack like the one Bo described that's comin'. It's a big, open space Covie light armour needs to cross halfway to even get into killing range and God help those jack soldiers who're supposed to follow alongâ€"sharpshooters and rocket batteries'll put 'em down so fast and so far away me and

you won't even need to fire off a round before it's all over."

"I understand that, but this is more important," Stern says.

"The least you could do is radio Colonel Mattis."

"I'm not gonna to do that, Reed."

"Why the hell not?"

"I said, this isâ€"

"Don't you fuckin' throw Charlie and Dog away like 2nd platoon," Reed says. "Don't you dare."

Bo says, "Sergeant, what you propose is a gamble with much, much more to be lost. The fact of the matter is, the Covenant march swiftly. T'also means there's a bit of distance between them and where we're trying to get to. It's an advantage we must make the most of. If we finish this mission, there'll be no more battles for Cassandra. No more human losses because of this world."

"How can you possibly think that's true?"

"It could be a turning point in this war, what we're about to do."

Reed puts on a face that is impassive and defiant, but his silence is something he's been forced into because he can't think of anything else to say to Stern in protest. So he waits for Bo to continue and she smiles at him, a kind of laborious tug of her upper lip that teeters on a sneer depending on the angle you look at it.

"We have a weapon," Bo says, "given to us by Naval Intelligence. They said you hit that objective and you don't leave Cassandra until you do. They said you hit Jackpot or you die getting thereâ€"doesn't matter who you lose or how many, they said, you get that package there. They'll be watching so you better do it, they said. Doesn't matter who I've lostâ€"how manyâ€"I've got t' get that package there. I just do."

"They gave you a bomb."

"More cruel." Bo says this with that smile. "There's a cavern about an hour from here, and inside it there's a natural spring. This is where we've got to go. We fight our way there, fight our way inside, deliver the thing, and then get out. Should not be too heavily guarded because I don't think the Covenant know what they're sitting on, themselves."

"It's a spring? Flowing? Not a still cesspool?" Reed says. "'Cause if you're planning on poisoning Covie, it won't work."

"Take me at my word. I'll make you a believer, Sergeant. You'll see things my way, before this war ends."

"Do you even know what it is you got with you? What it does?"

"It's chemistry. I know what to expect."

"Devastation, you said."

"Ye."

Reed says, "And my people are gonna die for you. All for you."

"You care about your menâ€"your brothers-in-armsâ€"I know. But what about your people back home? Who d'you care more about, Sergeant? When all's said."

"I won't answer that."

"These are fighting men. If they die, they'll have died fighting. Your actions today will make it all worth something. Their sacrifice, all worth something."

"But it's not up to you," Reed says. "It shouldn't be up to you."

"Why not me?" Bo asks. "D'you not think me worthy to lead? Make decisions? Or d'you think me not qualified enough? That I haven't suffered enough?" Reed says nothing, so Bo says, "Me, I am one woman, but I do my part, equal to what's been done backâ€"shooting 'em. Stabbing 'em. Skinning 'em. Burning 'em. Inflicting as much hurt on them as they have on us, and it's a tall order. They are manyâ€"and they have taken so much."

Reed says, "Everyone's suffered by Covie."

"Have they like me? Have they lost everything that makes a person whole?"

Many, Reed suspects. But he chooses not to interrupt.

"Then they'll look like me. Be like me," Bo says. "A woman so deeply scorned all that I am is resolve. The Covenant, they are not animalsâ€"they do not deserve pardon for having simple natures like lesser beings. They are monsters who come from some hell and I give myself wholeâ€"for I am resolveâ€"to the cause of causing the bleed. The little wound that rots or reopens again and again because I am there and I am alive to pick at and pry apart the flesh and I'll keep on doing this until I am needed no moreâ€"until I am no more."

"So why do you need us?" Reed asks. Stern looks like he could kick him in the shin.

"It's still your job to kill Covenant. It's not everyone's, but it's yours. You've got your rifle, boy, and your boots to tromp around in." Bo's fingertips swagger across the tabletop left right left right and her nails click like an old cavalryman with a limp. "And you call yourself a soldier, don't you? Some do, yeah, they call it their profession; but others cry dutyâ€"say a soldier's what they must become because it is noble and good and honourable. So which one are you, Sergeant? What kind of man are you? What kind of man d'you think yourself to be?" The way Bo looks at Reed now, he has the urge to get up and start running but she has him pinned with that stare of hers. She gets up and ambles around the side of the table so that she's behind him, and she tells Stern, "Captain, you'll want to inform your men we march in four hoursâ€"dead of night. Tell them to sleep. It'll do them good."

Stern nods, shoots Reed a look as if to say don't fuck this up for me, and leaves the room. Reed also shifts to move but he half-expects what's coming and doesn't cry out when Bo's big hand covers half his face and she sets her knife on the table clenched in her fist, blade pointed up, poised to enter through his cheek from below. Her body presses against his and the edge of the table juts into his ribs.

"Not you," Bo says directly into his skull, her bristly, steel-wool voice forcing its way in and keel-hauling his ear canal. "You're staying here with me, boyâ€"I know what you've done. I know it. I've known it the second you walked into m' home missing a man from your section but saying right to m' face you were full up when you weren't, y' sly fuck." Her sooty shadow scored into the wall is a long limbed alien devouring him.

Reed wishes he could say he doesn't know what she's talking about, but she'll probably cut his throat out if he does because he's not stupid and she's crazy. On the walk to the mine, as they moved deeper and deeper into the bush where it was only possible to keep on going by reaching out and touching the man in front of you, Reed fell behind. He slowed his pace to share murmurs with his Recon man, Wyatt, and when it was so thick and so dark around them, Wyatt slipped away into the foliage like a pencil-drop dive into a frigid green lake. Reed hopes he's made it back to the line at 449 safely, because that's what he told him to do. He said to tell them all to runâ€"drop everything and leg it back to HQ while they still could. Reed hopes that Covie didn't get Wyatt on the way there, and he hopes even more that Bo's Helljumpers didn't either. They're wild men who would do anything their wild captain told them to.

"You've killed us," Bo says.

"It was right," Reed rasps, muffled through her finger muzzle.

"It was them or us, and you chose them. You're condemned now. That frightens you. You're just shaking all over." Reed feels the tip of her nose brush by his temple so close he can hear the scrape of her tongue against her front teeth when she speaks the way she does. "I've not met an ODS'T who was afraid of comin' death."

"Everyone's scared. Just everyone denies it."

"I'm not. My boys aren't. So why are you?" Bo asks. "It puzzles me. You puzzle me."

"Because I'm not like youâ€"not like your people?"

"Because you should be. You've suffered too. This I know." Bo lays down her knife and then her hand slips down the front of his shirt. His combat vest can't protect him from this. He jerks away but she's wrapped around him too tightly, and she's confident she'll find what she knows is there. Her fingernails mount and conquer the jagged ridges that tear across his chest, the craters of glassy skin that sometimes hurt and exist all over his body (in places too where Reed hopes Bo won't discover). Then her sharp, dragging instrument becomes a suffusing warmth as it turns back into a hand and she leaves it in place for a moment, as if to cup his blabbering heart that's spilling out through his ribcage. She croons, "I will not injure you, Sergeant

Reed. Not like this, I won't. Just be still for me now."

She closes her eyes and she reads his scars like Braille and she smiles. In her way, she's feeling his life. Not the vibrancy of it or the joyful moments you might remember that proclaimed this was living, but everything else—"what the war did to him like it did to her, ravaging every inch as it passed through like a sensational hurricane. They had storm warnings all their lives—"had their chance to lose their nerve and run long before it hit—"but they faced it down while it flayed them because they were ODSs. They are both broken in the same way.

"Can't be pain you're scared of," she says. "You're scared of a loss that's greater than this flesh, something you won't even know's missing when it's one day gone."

Reed says, admitting to her, "I got doubts" and Bo understands. She's still holding him in a stiff clench, but now she puts her hand across his waist where he can see it, and Reed thinks, unsettled, this is a hug.

"Turn around. Look at me," Bo says. Reed does, and she peers down at him. "I won't kill you, Sergeant, for what you did. The Covenant might, but they might not. You're coming with us, that's for certain. You're a survivor. You'll protest and fight against the idea of death 'til the moment comes, and if that gets us to Jackpot, there's hope we'll get this done. We're not heading back to your HQ, so get it out of your head this minute. Focus; listen to what I say. And understand if you cross me again, you are mine to hurt."

Reed nods obediently.

"Get yourself straightened out. I don't care how, just do it," Bo says. "Myself, there's a whole different kind of power I worship. I won't protect me, but I don't need it to. To it I give myself whole. For I am resolve." The way she says this like it's a reflex, that scratchy whisper, Reed can tell she's said it so much she fully believes it. "Whatever happens, we'll bleed 'em savage. That I promise."

Reed says, "Most of your men are dead. What good's your promise?"

"I did not promise to bring them home."

When Bo turns away and leaves the room, Reed pulls back his own Helljumper knife from under the table where it was hidden and slips it into its sheath. The blood returns to his trembling knuckles and he watches the flickering kerosene lamp, wary of the monstrous shadow that could return at any moment, growing from the floor.

#

Boadicea's scouts return to where Shield company lies in wait, bounding through the shrubs out of breath. The way they ran through the trees, it took the utmost discipline not to shoot them down as they approached in the dark, they looked ghastly. They find Bo and tell her there's about a platoon's worth of Covenant troops milling around the area between them and the cave, Jackpot. They're random patrols and Bo's confident they can eliminate each one quickly

without getting overwhelmed.

Reed sticks close to the 112th ODS'Ts because Bo told him she wants him by her side at all times. She gave him the canister he has slung across his back now and said he's not to lose it under any circumstancesâ€"this is the miracle weapon Bo's counting on to make a difference. He's left Shield Recon under Lake's command and she said she'd do Reed proud but he's not sure what that was supposed to mean. Also perplexing was how Thompson, looking more pasty and ill than the last time he saw him, shook Reed's hand with his sweaty good one and said thanks and so long. Reed said I'll see you later and Thompson said nothing.

When Bo gazes through the trees at the moon, she decides now's a good time and motions to her troops. But the ODS'Ts don't shoulder their rifles and start off, instead they scrounge around in their rucksacks and Reed witnesses a crazy, practiced ritual that makes him stop and stare. They dig into little baggies with their knives and pass them down the line, snorting the brown, powdery mixture from the tips of their blades or fingernails and the night fills with simpering moans of both pain and satisfaction, whispers that begin to amplify in volume; somebody belts out a high-pitched cackle. Then Bo is upon Reed, her knife to his nostril and she says relaxâ€"take it all. He shuts his eyes and does, and with one bump, the upper shoots through his entire body. He grunts and shudders while Bo brushes off his nose with her dusty thumb then sticks it in her mouth into her gums, grinning, shaking too.

She moves down the line and gets to a knee to help out a man with spotted, blackened forearms, his rolled up sleeves revealing a network of deadened veins. She gets Reed to hold up a flashlight while the man undoes his belt and pulls down his pants, and with two unsteady hands Bo steers a hypo needle to the base of his penis. The man's leg flies out from under him and twitches and Bo puts her weight on her elbow, pinning him down until she is finished and the thick needle is out and lying a few feet away in the dirt. Once everyone is finally ready, Bo runs into the jungle with her people right behind her.

They hit the first patrol they come across with such ferocity and violence, the shocked Covies barely get off a shot. Bo's Helljumpers charge right into the disoriented file, firing off their rifles as they move, swinging them like clubsâ€"some have machetes or hatchets they've found and they hack them apart once their magazines are empty. Two men drag a squealing jackal into some bushes and destroy it. Reed thinks he hears their laughter; they are gnarled hoots of amusement. While he clutches his rifle and sweats, somebody walks alongside him and explains how he fucked his way through London for a year after dropping out of college, starting with this sweet and fresh chick Suzie and finishing with an old bow-legged sow called Christine who was actually kind of fantastic. At the end Reed says what's your point man and the Helljumper says listen better fucker and lopes off. No Covie escapes the attack.

Moving on, they similarly butcher a second patrol, and the Helljumpers reach the cave soon after. It's dug into a rock face overgrown with moss and vines, and Bo sends a runner back to inform Stern to move Shield company up to defend the entrance. They start heading down and Reed casts a long look over his shoulder but he doesn't know what it is he is looking for out there. He doesn't know

if there is something he has to loseâ€”if he'll even know that it's gone if it goes. Maybe that's why he's squinting at the moonlit jungle, searching so hard. He is trying to remember things he feels like he's forgotten and should be trying to cling to, but Bo hooks her arm through the crook of his, her bad touch nudging him along, and they leisurely descend into the depths together.

The ODSs split off into groups and each one takes a tunnel, searching for the spring. After walking ten minutes, Bo's group hears the roar of water coming from down the passage and they begin to hurry. They find where the cavern opens up and see the white, frenzied river that runs past, as if to escape the black place it ventured into. Then flashlight beams fall on the alien standing at the far end of the cavern but nobody shoots because they're surprised to see it here. It's alone, this skirmisher, and Reed realizes they're staring at the one Thompson called Rooster and it's staring back. With its naked, scarred body and red feathers that are still fierce in the dim light, the golden cowl that rests on its head gives it a regal look that you wouldn't expect. It waits for the Helljumpers to approach and surround it, not moving an inch, and Bo steps forward into the ring when one of her men hands her her sledgehammer she ordered to be brought along. She says to the skirmisher you remember me? The skirmisher, Rooster, looks from man to man, accepting things as they are and although Reed can't discern Covie expressions one from another except for anger or pain, he thinks he sees for once a look of resolveâ€”a decision just made, reflected in its stoic, noble features. The Helljumpers jeer and howl, urging it to fight.

Then in a fervent dash, Rooster takes a run at Boadicea, wrapped shivs in both of its clenched hands but Bo just brings her big hammer down at the right moment and splits apart that golden cowl, driving Rooster into the rocky ground and it's pretty well over. While it twists on the ground, woozy, Bo works quickly and precisely: she breaks both of its legs with some savage downwards chops, then she tosses aside her hammer and bends over Rooster's contorted face and slashes its throat with her knife.

Outside, in the area surrounding the cave, Shield only had moments to dig in before the Covies came. A smaller, third patrol at first, and the company gunned them all down like any other firefight, their rifles and light machineguns stuttering through the jungle. But like Bo had warned, the next group that arrived was the armoured battalion that had rushed back, turning from Hill 449, and they set upon Shield with unfettered strength, chipping away at the line or outright demolishing parts of it and forcing the overwhelmed men to recede toward the cave. The veteran jackals and skirmishers moved through the jungle with such speed and vigour, it took all of you to stand them down and not run. Behind them followed light-armour: roving carriages with Covie machinegun turrets mounted in the back, and these guns ripped through the Shield line with astonishing ease. Now at nearly the mouth of the cave, the Shield men stay low and fire at the battalion. Stern shouts to his company, singling out targets, but the battle is getting away from him, and he knows it's getting away from him. When the Covies call up fuel rod gunners to flush Shield from their defensive positions, they just about cleave the line in two and set fire to the jungle. It's in that first volley that Sergeant Lake and the marine Thompson become separated from their platoon while the vegetation burns all around them. Lake doesn't know how many men from 1st squad have been hit, but she knows they haven't

gotten out of this without some kind of loss. Plasma fire plasters their position and they can clearly hear the rapid, efficient barks of alien tongue just through the foliage; they sound devious and plotting.

Lake orders 1st squad to retreat to the cave and gets one of her men to lay down some suppressive fire, so he stands and almost immediately vanishes in a raucous green flash that chews up the tree next to him and singes everyone else. She stares at the spot he was a moment ago, mouth a little open and she's so shocked she can't even admit her nerves have failed her. Turret fire follows and nearly chokes them with heat as it roughly cuts by overhead. The Covie vehicle, the spectre, has them zeroed and continues to pelt the whole area. Lake looks back and catches Thompson's eye—he's got a nervous look about him, like he's got a secret that's burning through his gut. He peers over their scanty defilade and doesn't look away from the spectre that's pummeling them. His is the same look Stern had on his face earlier, before all of this, full of plotting and fantasizing, and it scares Lake so much she shouts at him to come over to her.

She starts screaming, though, when she sees what he's clutching tightly against his chest with his good right hand. His bony fingers curl around a fragmentation grenade and he's got a look of majestic resolve around his features (a decision that he's made, reflected), and when he looks at Erica Lake for what he believes will be the last time, he doesn't need to say "So long, Sergeant." He jumps up and starts running, ducking through the foliage on some kind of bee-line towards the Covie spectre that hasn't seen him yet. The weighty grenade he's afraid of letting go and dropping because it's sodden with sweat—he's been holding onto it tirelessly all night—was given to him by Boadicea, back in the mineshaft. While Lake slept, Bo came over and sat beside him and they spoke for a while. He said he was sorry they couldn't reach them, the 112th, and Bo said she was sorry about his marines. They told each other tales and grimaced appropriately, finding a comforting unity through a brief, shared history of adversity. She looked at him and he at her because they understood each other, and she asked him what he wanted, so he made his confession to her, and she touched both his eyes and told him it was all right. She had a look at his arm and said it wouldn't be getting better, would it, and Thompson said he didn't think so and Bo agreed. She placed the contoured, steel grenade into his palm and Thompson looked at her knowingly. She said 5th would be proud, and that she was proud of 5th. Thompson said he was, too.

He's in the shit now—he loops his thumb through the pin but it's a struggle doing all of this one-handed. He slows down just a little bit, but Lake doesn't—she tackles him from behind with all of her momentum and body weight and they drop into a little depression just off the battlefield. The grenade flies into some tall grass and three seconds go by and there's no explosive crack. There's just the rumble of fuel rod rounds flattening the jungle all around them. Lake pulls Thompson down and they lie together in this depression. She's saying over and over again although his ears are ringing and can't hear her, choose me. Choose me.

#

Boadicea's Helljumpers stand gathered around a fire they built inside the cave. They've strung up Rooster's bled-out body to the cave wall,

pinned upright by rope and climbing picks, a bloody offering that Bo said was perfect. Bo cut out its eyes and threw them into the fire. She stands next to it now, her knife in her hands while alien blood continues to drain from the ragged crevasse she tore. Solemnly, she cups both hands underneath the metered drip until her skin is good and wet and dark, then she smears it across her cheeks and across her nose and forehead. It gets into her yellow hair. She beckons for Reed to come to her and she does the same to his face, and he doesn't breathe through his nose anymore. She does this to each ODST under her command until they all shuffle around the fire, their necks and collars stained. When wind funnels through and kicks around the fire, their shadows whip into a frenzy behind them and the cave seems alive with primal energy, flickering and hopping as if to some long-ago animal skin drumbeat that careened throughout those tunnels they'll swear they heard. Taken by the pulsing dirge, Reed begins to move, and soon he can see his shadow up there with the others as they dance and flicker and sway all throughout this blue night.

3. Part III

Part III

One week later, the valley's become a soggy, running indentationâ€"everything unremarkably grey and melting. It's the water that runs through everything, unremitting, chewing up the riverbank and taking it down with it wherever it's going. It runs a poisoned, frothy white and it's not Shield company Hill 449 yielded to, in the end. The white river passed through here and from below ate the roots that were dug into the hill until that tall, swaying grass fell down and died and the rain and the wind washed it all away. The dirt followed too, and so Hill 449 that stood black and tall became a cowering, knee-capped pit.

Nobody knows if the Covies hiding there stayed for the end and were swallowed up into the earth when the bedrock became spongy and porous and brittle like an old man who was giving up. One soldier from Shield looked out upon the hill one day as it sank under the rain and muttered "Fuckin' beautiful" and Reed overheard him. A few others nodded and said fuck 'em but most just stared at the evil-beautiful destruction and kept on waiting until there was nothing left.

The first time Reed fired a rifle, he cried. He was nine and the slippery stock kicked him in the face and although it made him woozy and fat-lipped, that wasn't the reason why. In that moment he remembers, the poltergeist blast still wavered in the air, haunting it, and it was that first, initial sound the rifle gave that shocked him so bad. It was a snapping sound like something breaking or something wrong; it was like glass shattering and the sneaking feeling of getting in trouble. The gunshot was a loud, destructive noise in the tranquility that came before and returned afterâ€"a strong-armed ripple in the way things ought to beâ€"and he was let down by tall expectations that it should have been cathartic, a rite of passage into manhood so that he could be one of them now, those tough burly men he'd grown up around all his life who sweated, toiled and, on occasion, killed. But firing that weapon wasn't a celebration, though. It was an ordeal to be suffered through; something inflicted on him and something unpleasant to be subjected to, leaving its own kind of scar.

He was introduced to manhood then, truthfully, because that powerful, breaking sound was honest and raw and warned him about what was to come—the killers that were coming and the war. The gunshot was timeless and had a regretful inevitability to it like a miserable announcement of bad news but it did not coddle him. It did not lie.

Boadicea told him that long night a week ago that the only thing consistent and true was wild chaos. It's what she promised Reed, before he tossed the mundane-looking canister into the river in the cave, and she was not a liar. Covies crawled out of the jungle for days on all fours sometimes, leaking blood and falling apart in places. The infected water peeled through their bumpy skin; it made their teeth and claws come loose and drop off. Those who hadn't drunk from the river helped drag their dying comrades right to the edge of the frontline and then frantically surrendered to the 906th, arms outstretched—big-eyed like shin-splintered big game lying shocked and glistening on a country road, breathing in and out. These were skirmishers and jackals who came, but not their elite officers; patrols still return to HQ every day having suffered through fanatical, last-ditch charges urged on by the squids who'd rather stand in front of shrieking, red machinegun fire than quietly give up the fight. Boadicea and her men go hunting every night, looking for these headstrong Covies who hold a line they have already lost and are getting decimated in swarms because the Helljumpers don't take any prisoners. The Covies come out to surrender during the day, when they are not howling savages with cruel, sneaky eyes and it is okay for them to be pitied—during the day, when Boadicea's men are sleeping because at night they come out swiftly and leave, and nobody stops them from leaving. Nobody knows what they do out there except for Reed—he has a pretty good idea because he joined along once. Now, though, this week later, Reed's face is smashed and swollen shut. He's doped up and paralyzed when he thinks about them (and then tries not to) when he hears them shuffle by in the dark like the leathery flutter of bats' wings, all of them wordless, driven because they are thirsty and need to drink. They're an unnatural ripple in the way things ought to be.

#

Private Wardell Reilly from Shield company has shared a cigarette with some men from the 112th once or twice before. They've asked for a light, and he's asked for a light. That second time, they stood around and talked, and they asked him what his story was. Well, he told them, I'm in Shield 1st platoon—3rd squad. Volunteered from Charlie, he said.

You were out there with us, they said to him, that night?

—that night, when the Covies came crashing down like a disastrous, plummeting wreck. And that night, when the 112th came streaking out of their cave like they were possessed and drunk on believing, and everyone (Shield too) fought hard and died and pushed the bastards back—

Fuck yes I was, Reilly said, proud. Fuck yes I was.

How many did you folks lose out there, they asked him.

His cigarette went hot in his hand, perturbed by the sneering flame

that was foreign and invaded it, and he thought they were mocking him. What right did he have, he thought, to stand beside these two, these brazen godsâ€”destroyers of thingsâ€”when he was so insignificant. He admired them so completely, the way they strode like bronze champions, the way they hurt the Covies so completely. There was an order to it all, though, and these people weren't your friends. They were your jackbooted betters. Shrinking back, Reilly sought to save himself any more embarrassment because he knew he'd overstepped. Butâ€”

You were good out there, he heard them say, suddenly. There's a hundred marine units who wouldn't have lasted anywhere near as long. They'd broke and started running the moment the Covies come clanking 'round the bend. You were good out there. You were hard.

We did our part, Reilly said with a smile, but man, y'all were incredible. Man, you killed those fuckin' Covies.

The Helljumpers gave shy grins. Modest, little grins.

Then Reilly told them about his folks back home who were glassed along with everybody and everything else; and his brothers who went one by one over the years, lost to this long warâ€”this drawn-out war. He's got reasons to hate. He feels old.

How's it feel to get so close to them? Reilly asked.

Feels good, they said. Like it makes up for everything they've done back, they said. Anybody can shoot 'em and watch 'em fall, but it's not the same. Doesn't feel the same. Because you forget. Never forget.

Man if I got my hands on one of 'em, Reilly said.

What would you do?

Reilly had given this some thought long before. Without reserve now, he said, Do it slow. Fuck 'em up so bad they couldn't walk. They didn't give us a fair fight, did they? Break his arms, so he couldn't hit back. It's what they deserve, right? Every one of 'em. I'd do it myself.

The Helljumpers nodded and said right on. Devilish smoke came out of their nostrils.

Tonight, Reilly walks along the edge of the ODST camp, meandering with purpose. He hears an engine creep up behind him the deliberate way a jungle cat crawls, and he sees the two Helljumpers from before sitting together inside a warthog. Although he's got a lighter tucked inside his breast pocket, he waves at them through the spiky antlers of headlights that shoot up and sting his eyes and says, Hey, you fellas got fire?

Without saying hey, without smiling, justâ€”get in the back, the driver says.

Reilly looks caught off-balance standing upright with an unlit cigarette sticking out of his mouthâ€”he's been taken by surprise. He didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't this. He mumbles a bit and decides half-heartedly to say, Don't think I'm here too long, boys.

Sergeant wants me sleeping soon. Early patrol tomorrow.

The Helljumper in the passenger seat swings a leg over the side. He's much bigger standing up. He tells Reilly to get in the fucking truck.

Reilly climbs on and hangs on while the warthog tears out of there and no sentry bothers stopping it to ask if anyone's being kidnapped. They take a muddy back-road out into the dripping trees that cower like children. Everything is dark all over. It's just them now, and the whole time no one says a fucking thing. Reilly almost doesn't breathe, stuck at the mercy of the cold-blooded, fag-drag silence; he can't do anything but feel the breathless feeling of driving towards a crime.

They come to a chain-link enclosure with flaps of tarp peeling off but it's all just shadows inside, and the warthog squeaks as it drifts to a stop. The thing's been constructed quietly here off this beaten path, tucked away with ten tonnes of sickening hush-hush. The Helljumpers slip a padlock off the gate and hold it open for Reilly to pass through. He doesn't venture too far but the Helljumpers know this spaceâ€”they move to separate corners unabated by the dark, unafraid. One switches a work light on, its wire hook hung from the ceiling, and the dim illumination trickles down garage-like; it's a faithful, shining enabler of any weeknight hobby. This feels no different.

The other Helljumper pulls a menacing hood off a Covie elite who is chained up with monster-truck chains in the corner, who is shot and cut and bruised and who barely breathes. It's been tortured for a long time. Reilly doesn't budge from his spot near the door.

Come on, they tell Reilly. Get in there. Make 'em pay.

They slap a used claw hammer into his hand that was lying around and give him a little push forward. Like he's on two wheels for the first time, he is wobbly and reluctant. The elite opens its yellow eyes as much as it can and stares at him through folds of swollen skin. Reilly could imagine incredible violenceâ€”has imagined it before. He imagined how good it'd feel. He remembered how the Helljumpers promised that, too. The weight of the hammer is the only thing keeping him stuck to realityâ€”he doesn't let go of it because it is how a hammer in his hand should feel. It's the most ordinary feeling in all of this. With just one swing, that is a sensation he knows he will remember as well and it'll no longer be just an imagined weight. It'll be so much heavier. He tells himself he wants this. He tells himself it's what he is owed. So just do it, just do it, just do it.

The elite is waiting for the hit, too. It keeps its lizard eyes on Reilly's the whole time. It's not menacing anymore. There's nobody who'd be frightened of the bastard, looking like this. It can't hit back and it can't run away. Reilly tells himself he wants this. They started it. They made it a crime to exist and killed us for simply being. Why are you deserving of compassion? What is it you're owed? Are you wanting for death, like the rest of your kind?

Do you have redemption in you? Would you accept mercy, if I gave it?

Or am I your deliverer?

#

Lieutenant Briar of Shield company, 2nd platoon, is waiting for a ride off-world. He sits on a pile of supply crates that is his drizzling bus stop and watches pelicans take off and land. He put in his transfer request a week ago and didn't tell anyone except those who needed to know. Captain Stern, when he told him, stared at him a while then said I'm sorry to hear that but these were just words. Briar didn't really believe him anyway. He knows he is replaceable to Stern. He is like all of them, replaceable. He looked at the faces of his men one day when it was quiet and got all their names wrong and they didn't care. They laughed and said it was all right. They didn't know him either. That's why he's leaving. It was a terrible failing and he's the only one who seems to notice.

He hasn't stopped thinking about what happened on Hill 449, that glorious, gutsy charge he stood at the front of while the Covies gunned them down. He won't ever forget what he did. What he did without thinking twice—did simply because Pelton wouldn't and he had thought he was a coward at the time (Lake, too, a disloyal coward). Well Briar listened. Briar was faithful, but that means nothing to him now, and it meant nothing to Stern. Briar looked up to their goddamned captain, like most of them. He listened to him talk about bravery and honour and never letting up, and he admired his stubborn ferocity then. He was a man of action, their captain, and Briar chose to believe everything that came out of his mesmerizing mouth. That was another failing that can be blamed on nobody but Briar himself. It's up to him to leave for good. This unit is as poisoned as this dying planet that's eating itself.

Briar's got everything he owns next to him bundled up in a rucksack. It's not much. It's mostly a crumpled uniform packed with the hasty carelessness of an evacuation. It's motel night luggage because he's been kicked out of his house. Nobody forced him, really, but he knows he has to go. He's done too much wrong to stay.

A few men walk by and Briar doesn't make eye contact, suddenly interested in his blackened palms. They stop in front of him and say, "Hey L.T."

"Hey," Briar says back. "Bartlett, Hayes." He waits for them to tell him he fucked up again but they don't and he's secretly relieved. "How are you two?"

"Fine, sir," Bartlett says.

"This fucking weather, eh?" Briar says.

"Worst of the storm's past, though," Hayes says.

Briar nods. "We survived it, I guess. Lucky us."

Then they all nod. When Briar doesn't say anything else, Bartlett says, "Heard you're out of here, sir."

"I am."

"I'm sorry you're leaving."

Briar squints at Bartlett for a bit. He doesn't know if those words are genuine or a simple formality. Still he says, "I appreciate that."

"I know what the other guys are saying," Bartlett says. "About you. About 449."

Briar bows his head—"hearing this is like a shameful shame being dredged up by a scorned someone. A vengeful someone who might never forgive and who might never forget. But Bartlett is not that someone.

"There was no way out of it," Bartlett says. "Either we went forward or somebody else did. You volunteered us 'cause it was your duty. And it's ours to follow you. We did that, sir. You led, we followed. Not once did you let us get ahead of you. When 2nd platoon went down, you went down with 'em at the head. For that I am grateful. You saw what we saw. You're one of us, Lieutenant."

Briar wants to slap Bartlett's stupid, rosy face but he forces a painful smile, like his epic reassurances have lifted him up out of this. Don't be okay with what I've done, Briar wants to tell them. Don't be okay that I killed you. Don't justify it, boys, because I can't, and I've tried. Led you up that hill all for what? Hill's gone now.

"You boys ever think of leaving the unit—"if you could?" Briar asks them.

Bartlett and Hayes shrug. "Tell me one better," Bartlett says.

Briar can't. He doesn't even know where he's going next.

"Is the captain making you leave, sir?" Hayes asks.

"No he ain't," Briar says with a chuckle. "No he ain't, but I can't stay. Stern wouldn't lay a finger on me."

"You just remember what I said, sir," Bartlett says.

"I'll do that," Briar tells him. He looks at his watch and relaxes his shoulders finally. "Now I don't know who's taking over for me, but you boys got anyone in mind from the platoon?" They shrug again. Briar thinks for a minute. "I say Ricardo should. He's been long overdue to make Lieutenant. If I know him, he'll take care of you all right."

"Judging by the shit Stern pulled, might even be somebody from Charlie," Hayes says.

"Then maybe I'll leave," Bartlett says. "If that happens."

"Charlie ain't no one who should be scoffed at. There's more of them than there are us, boys," Briar warns. "They're who Shield is now."

"Well you see who's in charge of 1st platoon now? Atwal? Jesus," Hayes says. "Ain't nobody happy there. Don't expect her to last too long."

The thought of someone taking over and running things differently, running things like a stranger would, scares Briar worse than going into combat again. He fears for his people, even those who spit his name like a bogeyman swear and turn their backs to him when he comes by. He wants to know who's coming into this house, who's going to lead his boys into the storm. Shelter 'em. He wants to ask of who's coming, are you kind? Loving? Will you treat them like your own? Like I ought to've?

But Briar knows he's not the man up to the task anymore. When Bartlett and Hayes say goodbye one more time, Briar sticks around and watches the pelicans take off and land and feels the creeping drizzle he is alone in. He steals a last glance at the two soldiers and suddenly he's the divorcee father trapped in the rearview window of a leaving taxicab as it pulls away from the curb, who sees his boys there watching him go. They're young and they don't understand why it is he's got to go. Maybe they'll realize it for themselves, later. Maybe they'll resent him for it, for running out like this.

You're one of us, Bartlett said to him. You made us. His words already sound soaked with omnipotent blame when Briar remembers them and that's the way he'll remember them forever. It'll weigh him down and tire him out and he'll find a way to drown.

Stern said before that Briar wasn't a coward and it made him so proud, so that's why he led that charge up 449â€"to live up to that brash flattery he was after. But those were just words and Briar didn't dare have it in him to tell Bartlett and Hayes and everyone else (because these are just words too): I'll do better, next time. For all of you I left and all of you I'm leaving. I'm sorry.

#

Captain Stern's sitting on a rolling chair he's rolled outside under a gently breathing awning when Sergeant Lake comes up to him. He peels an orange like a pinhole surgery, meticulously and deliberately, and ignores Lake until she says, "I need to talk to you."

"What do you want from me?"

"I hear Lieutenant Briar's not long for this unit."

"So he isn't."

"I'd like to lead 2nd platoon."

Stern looks like he's about to laugh. He looks mean and like he's about to tell Lake to fuck off. "Why?" he just says.

The question's a test and Lake can go right into it if she was forced to. She's got a lot to say. It's about him, and about herself, and the men she believes she can look after. They're in need of protection, and she's the one to do it because there've been too many before her who have come and gone already who said yessir like a goddamn reflex when prodded. It's too dangerous a quality to possess. It's the wrong kind of devotion. She can go right into it forever but she doesn't; Stern acts like he's playing along with some kind of

joke, being a good sport because somebody paid her to go up and ask. She'd probably have done it, too, if that was the storyâ€"she is that kind of person, and Stern fucking knows it. She's wasting his time and she hasn't said anything yet.

"I can be a good officer," she tells him. Lake is testing Stern right back.

"You think so, or you know so?"

"Better than Briar was, for sure," Lake says. It's a declaration she's kept inside for a while. It feels good to say it and she feels like she's finally allowed. He is leaving for a reason.

Stern is pinched by the remark. He says to her, "You don't have a clue what you're saying, Lake. You will shut your fuckin' mouth, and I'm not telling you as your CO."

"I won't take it back." Lake doesn't back down, stung. She's in this now with everything she has to throw. She'll deal with the fallout after. "Briar fucked up. That's why he's out."

"Briar was exemplary. He did everything asked of him. His name doesn't deserve to be dragged through the mud by you. Especially you."

"I didn't say the fuck up was his alone."

"Goddamn you, Lake," Stern hisses. "Goddamn you, don't you dare think that I've done something shameful, or something wrong."

"I'll think what I think. You don't get a say in that."

"I expect you're sore about Ted Moyer, aren't you?"

Lake doesn't even think Stern should be able to say his name anymore. Even if she doesn't know for sure, she knows that Stern's to blameâ€"she knows where to put all her anger because it doesn't make sense anywhere else. Moyer was seduced away from her. After this one, Cassandra, she expects more and more 906th men will start seeing what Moyer saw, blinded by Stern's whispering and promising. And Moyer, Stern will say, Moyer found glory. His was a good death (but neither Stern or anyone will know how he died) and everyone would just be lying.

Stern says, "Everything I did for a reason. I'm sorry you don't see it my way."

"I know your reason better than you know it yourself," Lake says. "You're a hound. You've got exactly one purpose for being and that's for the hunt. You're attuned to the smell so much that you can't think of anything else. Wherever there's killing you come running but you don't come to lend a hand or mop up. You're not worth calling even what you hate so badâ€"a vulture. You're not in it for the taste of blood. You don't want a meal of it. You want to smear it all over and make a mess. Somebody comes and says what the hell happened, and you finally get the chance to tell them a story. So you talk about the beastliness of the fuckers who came like painted savages over the hill and you want so much to be a cowboy Caesar who held the line until he could no longer; you talk about the hero souls who offered

their lives and were decimated, who should be so honoured to die in this righteous reckoning becauseâ€_all_ becauseâ€we are holy and we are good."

"Well aren't we?"

With this Stern has stumped Lake.

"Aren't we supposed to be?" Stern says.

She thinks of a slithery way out but Stern moves in on this silence, muscling her out with his own weight. He stands wearily to meet her at eye level.

"Who are we if not bedraggled defenders?" he says. "If not survivors of a meteoric holocaust? If not the ones left with the most cause for retribution? We're cornered animalsâ€got our claws out. And you, Lake, you're not going to disagree with anything I've said because you know I'm right. You know it. Because if you don't think so, why the hell are you even here? Why'd you sign on to fight? If the Covenant aren't evil, what are they? Misguided? Just following orders?" He shakes his head. "It still takes a deep-rooted wickedness in them to kill the way they haveâ€on the scale that they haveâ€an inherent cruelty that pervades every sense of their being. If they've done good I've not bore witness to it. I refuse to believe that it might be the other way around, that this is our punishmentâ€that this is wrath. No, I think it's a trial and we're failing."

"Because we're not as devout as they are?" Lake says.

"Because we're not good enough to survive as we are. I don't know if we're holy or good, but we ought to be. We should want to be. You ever meet a Spartan? They're cold and unfeeling. They're survivors. People say they're not human and they're not wrong about that. They're the best humanity's got to offer, but we can't even agree about what's under the suitâ€might as well be alien themselves. They say that they're just people who went under the knife, who've evolved and who possess the greatest traits a human being could possibly have all through the miracle of science. You could say they got an upgrade, but I don't see it that way. They're the ones lacking. Yes, they're good soldiersâ€and yes, they're miraculous killers."

"They protect us."

"You see a difference?" Stern asks. "They're a reminder, at the end of everything. God, they're the ugliest part of humanityâ€they're the apex of our ability to hate and descend to the terriblest depths and thrive there when by all rights it should destroy us. It does, though, most of us. Until we're just hollow. And it strikes me to say that if that's all that's left, what've we toiled for? Nothing worth saving survived."

Lake says, "Isn't existence enough?"

"This is existence," Stern replies, glancing over her shoulder. He means everything else but Lake still looks at the land. This dying planet, Cassandra, is an assaulted sight. It is suffering. "We are existing. We're right on the brink. We aren't getting out of this until we kill them all, or they kill us all. There is no great reward at the end of this. Otherworldly or otherwise. I can say this to you,

Lake. My words don't inspire you like they do the men. I think you're as cynical as I am."

"I see right through you. I always have."

Stern nods and says, "You don't deserve to be a lieutenant, Lake. Not because you're no good at killing Covenant, nothing like that. You're a thinker. Idealist. You got big ideas but you're not one to do what it takes to see them through. Not in the way it needs to be done. No, you're no lieutenant. For you, Lake, a colonel, or a brigadier general. Somewhere tucked away so you don't have to see the gears working; how messy they all get. How they break often, and how they need to be replaced. You can be grand architect on the blueprint and dazzle me with your kindness and cunning. But you can't be a lieutenantâ€"not in my company. We're gnashing teeth. Until we're worn down to scared nubs, you and me."

"A captain can look after his people, too."

"What would you do if you were in my place?"

"Try not to slaughter everyone under me, to start."

"You think I'm villainous, right? Lake? Or maybe incompetent? I can live with that oneâ€"I'm not infallible I knowâ€"but I never want you to think of me as evil. Everything I did for a reason."

"You keep saying that. You never proved me wrong."

"Because you're right," Stern admits. "In part. You're right, I'm looking for heroes. You're right, I'm looking for heroics. But it isn't for my sake. I'm not selfish, despite what you think."

"Then what?"

"Merciful," Stern says. He's thought about this conversation before. "This is my crusade, Lake. Yeah I say let's go boys, let's beat the bastards back; I say we've got the grace of god on our side and I rile you up from my pulpitâ€"make you want for bloodâ€"but I knowâ€"and maybe you do tooâ€"the war's already over. Or it's nearing the end. We are not the secret weapon. We're the comforting hand to hold during the bleed-out and I don't see a happy ending except for the one we create here ourselves. We're here to show them that the Covenant can be tripped up. That it'll take lives and blood and guts to do it and this kind of loss is what's needed, but that it can be done. But never that they can be stopped. That's not our job. They're looking for a turning point we'll never deliver. The Highwayman's supposed to be the last line of defense so hold on, we'll tell them, we'll be along so just hold on, but it's a cozy fiction. We won't save all of themâ€"it's impossible, Lake. Only thing we can do is lie to them and tell them they're doing god's work, dying with honour. Because soon it won't matter. Best we make them feel like it does."

"So you're a liar," Lake says. "A fraud. You're not a man of faith but you pretend to be."

"What we're doing is selling hope," Stern says. "That's the only thing that's worth something these days. There's demand for it. We're clamouring for it. I am a liar. I might be the greatest fuckin' one

you'll ever know." He crosses his arms and leans against one of the awning poles dug into the ground, anchoring himself. "When my father was dying, he wanted to see my sister before he went. Soon, I kept telling him. I made every kind of excuse every day she wasn't there. I said she was cutting a path straight home, but the road was long and rockyâ€"it'll be a wait. So he waited, but when he couldn't wait anymore, he said to tell her that he tried his best. And he had. He was so happy to know she was on her wayâ€"every morning he'd gotten up, shaved, dressed in his best suit and for a while he was taking on the world when it was set on kicking him down. It made his last days bearable." Stern pauses a moment. Lake took a seat on a pile of sandbags as he talked, and now she is quiet. She allows him this moment free of judgment and her usual scorn. He says, "The Covenant had killed my sister two years before that. Don't ask me how I know, I just do. I got word from a friend the whole unit had gone missing, and I squelched the news before my father could find out. I kept it from him until he passed. She was nothing over eighteen. Her name was Brittanyâ€"she joined the marines on the frontline because she wanted to turn the tide and she believed she could. To her it was all a fairytale. She'd write to tell me every night what she'd learned in trainingâ€"who she was making friends with. She'd been excited to ship out. She wasn't afraid. I was working a bullshit marketing job thenâ€"shot commercials for the UNSCDF. I used to go to schools with recruiters and say to kids you better hurryâ€"the Covies might be dead before you get there."

Stern and Lake ponder mud puddles for a while. They listen to the rain they're protected from. It hasn't been sunny for some time now.

"I shamed them into it. Doesn't matter who. The youngest die like any of us. Tumble like bodies that quit, indiscriminate," Stern says. "This war's not about protecting them anymore. We're past that now. We're burning the crops, filling the trenches with old men and children. Nothing's precious."

Lake remains hidden in the crushing, meditative silence like she's holding her breath underwater, invisible, and Stern, barelegged in a way she could never imagine beforeâ€"boyish, maybe evenâ€"sits on a jetty nearby.

"Why do you want to make lieutenant, Lake?" he asks.

"I just do," she says, resurfacing. She takes in sweet air. "I can't stomach the thought of another officer like Briar. Or a stranger like Atwal. I'd take Pelton backâ€"if I were his first sergeant. But I prefer somebody we knowâ€"somebody who's one of us."

"You look after your men as a non-com. I hear you're good at it. Why throw that away?"

"Shield company's my home," Lake says. "It's mine to protect. All of it."

"Still, I'm not going to make you lieutenant, Lake. It's my decision and you're gonna have to live with that. You say you don't want somebody like Briar taking over, but he was exactly what we needed. Not everyone makes the best officer. Filling that position with the right man or woman is critical to this outfit, more than any other. Taking that hill was critical. No matter how it was done. We need

somebody who believes in what we're doing. Who really thinks they're going to stop the Covenant dead."

"You want a fanatic."

"You can't follow a damned order. You can't keep your opinions to yourself. You'd kick the ankle of the forward foot whenever we took a step. If you didn't want to see death, this unit's the last place you should be," Stern says. "We're all going to die sometime, someday and soon. But Shield'll live on, just like there'll be a new Sword. This company isn't just a bunch of soldiers anymore—this company ain't people. It's beyond that now. People'll remember the name long before they remember you or me and whatever hell we've skirted, whoever we lost along the way. They're not people anymore—they're pieces of a story. We'll all be washed away and buried like that hill up there, forgotten but for the validation that we won and the Covenant didn't, once upon a time, owing all to the actions and sacrifices of brave men. Extraordinary men. We need to make the biggest splash, leave the longest ripples; we need people to remember. Because the only thing with any kind of permanency to it is death. Don't kid yourself. Death's what we leave, Lake. Death's all we're here for."

#

Wardell Reilly's hands are red when he gets outside again and he feels sick when he sees there's someone waiting outside. SFC Reed gets up from his casual lean against the hood of his warthog. There are three other men with him from Recon.

Where are they? Reed says. Reilly can't stop his head from jerking back over to where he left, giving the Helljumpers up without reservation. He looks ashamed to Reed, which is fine.

Wait by the truck, Reed says. Now.

When the Helljumpers appear, a Recon man suckerpunches one and they jump them like it's a turfwar back alleyway. They all swing fists and clubs they found, they all kick them in the teeth. Reed stomps on them until they make animal noises, just delirious sobs like pleas because they are so fucked up they can't do anything else but bleed. Reed doesn't care if it's not a fair fight. It wasn't a fight. He took a wild backhand that has him dribbling blood down his chin but he knew otherwise exactly what he was in for.

They leave the Helljumpers lying in the dark when they drive away, everyone hushed. Reed doesn't care to know if they were still breathing or not.

He says to Reilly during the ride back, you see anyone from the 112th tonight, you tell them there's two of them out here. You tell them it was me who did it.

Sure enough a half day later at night, Reilly finds Reed and says, uneasy, she wants to see you.

She said that? Reed asks.

I've been told, Reilly says. Then he says, don't go. You don't need to.

Reed stands and says, she wants to see me.

It's dark all throughout the camp, and unbearably black and empty in the 112th's quarter. Reed marches through it because up ahead he sees a light coming through tent flaps, opened upâ€"he knowsâ€"for him. He navigates by this, reaching for the end of this tunnel.

There she is waiting for him. In the distance, she's just a tall, black shape possessing the light behind her that was luring him close and summoning her flickered shadow Reed has seen beforeâ€"that grows from the ground and everything. It is a permanent creature, unkillable and ancient, extending long before her to meet Reed and he feels it on him. He feels her on him like ice cubes bonding to sticky skin, her knifepoint nails that teased him breathless once before.

She said he was hers to hurt. If he crossed her again.

There she is waiting with her cronies who look impish around her. Reed doesn't know what he's in for, but he has some idea. It's a long walk. His muddy sounding footsteps trudge with a lonely confidence. He has all the time to turn and run but he doesn't. There's a tempest up ahead and he will stand still while she flays him, if she does. He won't fight back.

Boadicea told him the only thing she promised him was wild and true chaos. Like nothing mattered, and that's how things were going to be. It was a time for killers and she owned the night. She said that Reed was no different from her. He might protest, think himself above her and them, but Bo was confident she'd bring himâ€"she'd make him see things her way, she said. And when they killed together, didn't she see even a glimpse of contentment in him? He relinquished control for a time, let her lead the dance, and he didn't have to pretend like he didn't belong for once. Among the 906th, he is an outlier. Some call him protector, but they all mean killer and still nobody judges him for it.

This never sat right with him. It's not how things should be. There's nobody who should get this kind of free reign because it hints at something uglierâ€"at what's already lost.

Reed is looking for reassurance, affirmation that things are not really how Bo says they are, that order does exist; that everything comes with their painful costs. Consequences. He's seeking boundaries that Bo insists have collapsedâ€"and good riddance. He's seeking definition and distinction, and he goes with his cowboy goodness to draw that line, and make sure there's still something to fight againstâ€"for a reason, of course. He goes looking for justice in Bo's tent. He can't get away with what he's done, and he goes to get punished because in this way he feels it will prove her wrong.

The Covenant, none of that matters. This here is the test that could mean everything, really everything. Tonight Bo and her men will kick the shit out of Reed or worse but, for once, he will feel clean.

#

Everyone's getting ready to leave Cassandra. They're sick of this

used ruin, this cloudy place. It's lost its dangerous beauty, that seductive, hide-and-seek grandeur that empowered it and threatened. It's no longer exotic, but worn. They're bored of it. They've forgotten the terror the way somebody gets used to breathing near a ravaged corpse.

There are these here too, stacked in high piles, rotting. They had time to bury them but they chose not to and left them in the sun so they became mushy and falling-apart. The war photographers have been flown in and they travel in a touristy pack, pointing, snapping, smiling. They pinch their noses. War is hell, they laugh, and the 906th men surrender to the contagious mood that's contaminating everything, a funny feeling like the war's coming to an endâ€”just look at the evidence. They're high on their own vandalism, the breaking of everything. One soldier, when he feels like he's being watchedâ€”quietly urged to performâ€”kicks a bloated corpse and fat maggots pop out and get all over his boot like pulpy watermelon flesh.

When the sun slips away, everyone gets together and they burn the carcasses and choke with watery eyed, asphyxiated grins. To the reporters, some men show off Rooster's crown that they grave-robbed. It's still shiny and everybody wants to touch it. It's a tangible piece of victory more powerful than Stern's hillâ€”it's gold; bedazzling. It is a hoisted flag and like a muddy Roman standard it means everything to the triumphant those who resisted an empire. Rooster himself is hung from a tree, bloated, limbs outstretched. Someone plucks a feather from its scalp and tucks it into his helmet band, and someone else paws at it. Hercules wore the skin of the lion he clubbed, sure, but these men weren't anywhere near where Rooster went down. The creature means nothing to them except for stories they heard. They all want a slice of mythology they can only imagine, because more than anything else they want to believe they were part of something great.

The battle itself went fine or spectacular. They held the line outside the cave, Jackpot, until Bo and the 112th returned from the mouth, bloodied up and feral and high. They charged the Covie line, confusing them long enough for 10th Air Cav and eager men from Charlie and Dog companies to arrive and blow apart the jungle. Wyatt, Reed's man from Recon, had done his job, running back with Reed's message. He deserves all the credit he can getâ€”he saved Shield company. But when the Covenant broke off their attack, the 112th, invincible and fearless, ran after them and killed them and that's all anyone wants to talk about. That was winning. It looked and felt like winning. There'll be nothing precious here soon but this, too, feels like winning. The breeze stinks of burnt hair. It's exciting like vandalism, like breaking glass.

On the last day, before they start pulling out of there, the heads gather up all of 906th, 1st Battalion because the commander from ONI, LeFae or whatever, wants to say something. Moving alongside the 906th head, Mattis, he struts up the rows of troops, shaking hands, slapping men on their shoulders whoever's within arms-reach, muttering, "Outstanding boys, just outstanding." He's youngish and handsome and smooth.

He takes his place up in front, above the men, looking down with a stately grin and says about what you'd expect from someone like him. Hell of a jobâ€”Jesus what a showâ€”God bless you. The men clap and

revel in praise like little kisses. They want to hear how great they are, all the tiredness and horror they felt now worth it and forgotten.

Reed sits up in his cot in the medic tent—where he's been for two days—with a struggle to do it and stands near the exit, watching through what his fucked up face allows him to see. He doesn't breathe so good, now that his nose is smashed in, and he doesn't think he'll be able to stand long enough to stick through the whole thing (if he can stomach it as well). The worst of his pain is neutered by medication, though.

"I can't properly tell you how important this campaign was to the war effort," LeFae says, excitedly. "Your mission, and the role the 112th ODS played... paramount. All just paramount. It was a tough struggle we faced, but the worthiest came through it in the end. If that doesn't show our place in this universe—dominant—it's not a universe worth surviving. Call it divine right, because I sure will. That we're still here means something. We've been given the gift to continue the fight, so we must. Just look at what we accomplished here today." LeFae gestures behind and all around him. Look at Cassandra, still falling apart. "This victory," he says. "And others more like it."

The men still whoop for nothing. The nothing they gained. That hill, 449, belonged to the Covenant only briefly. It was always ours even if it wasn't for the moment, and it was ours to reclaim. It's nothing now, and look at us, look at how we lord over it. Look at us lords of nothing.

Look, this is the mark we'll leave. This is our story, our flayed skin. It was never about saving Cassandra, a heroic liberation-rescue it was supposed to be. She was ours to destroy and we'll kill it before we'll let you take it from us. It's ours to fuck up if we want to. Cassandra, and everything else we own, and we'll do it, too. (We're wired with a dead man's switch state of mind.) But the thought of that freedom quickly vanishing nauseates us, the Covenant having that kind of hold over us. Them, oppressive in our thoughts, creeping in always, making everything else trivial—making us less of a person for thinking of anything different. So devote yourself to the cause of causing hurt. This is what we stand for. You'll see things our way, by the end of this war.

LeFae turns and points out proudly whoever he can of the 112th who stand gargoyles over the 906th men, chiselled and elevated endlessly. In a corner Bo is there watching LeFae with her wickedly proud eyes. In his directed spotlight, she and them, her fucking scourge, are saintly and everyone believes it. They control this place of worship.

It hurts to look at her. But Reed can't look away or let her out of his sight so she lingers just at the edge. LeFae applauds the 112th for holding on, being the model everyone should aspire to be like. True warriors, he says at one point. His words make Reed feel like lying back down because he is overcome with a shuddery sick. He can't distract himself from his thoughts, of which they've been the same for two days now—they're previous scenes that ram their way back into his consciousness and crowd him like uncontrollable noise with nowhere else to go. His mouth tastes like blood. It's a spiral of things he thinks about: him, pounding a man into the dirt—the

Helljumper, the two they snuck up onâ€”because he is inwardly angry. He thinks he heard them beg while they could still talk, but there was no mercy or second thoughts about it from him. It was the cool killer doing this. Every landed blow he feels again, the weight of it real and tactileâ€”this is what it feels like to beat someone to death or close to it. He felt then, above all, they deserved it and he'd deserve what came next.

In Bo's tent, there wasn't much talking going on that night. There seemed to be a mutual understanding of why Reed showed up. He was an ODS, for one and Bo never doubted that he would appear. Bo knew Reed had something to prove, but really, that was for him to come to terms with, not her. He was never going to sway her or whatever. That wasn't in her nature. She's too far gone and stuck in her ways. She's wild and sadistic, and he was hers that night because there was a score to settle they both knew.

She whipped him with the steely butt of her Helljumper knife until he couldn't take anymore and fell down, cut up. Her gang took their revenge on him for two of their own, repaying Reed for what he did, fists and boots, clubs they found, and then Bo wanted to make sure he knew he was hers while he was still conscious. They stomped him flat and they pulled down his pants. Bo descended on him, and that's all he really remembers but he knows the night lasted longer than that. They dumped his ragged body outside the 112th quarter of the bivouac and someone found him the next morning.

Everyone knows he got like that from a fight, maybe a boxing match gone too far, but the army doctors who looked over Reed all know it was much moreâ€”much worse. But Reed never told them who did it to him. They patched him up, sewing him back together in some places, and didn't force the issue. He lay around for two days, mostly listening or staring at the canvas roof whenever he could force apart his eyelids.

Thompson and Lake came to visit him when they heard the news, but they didn't really know how things were between him and the 112th. He pretended to be asleep until Lake left, but Thompson, he had a cot in the medic tent already so he sat nearby the sergeant first class, his own arm in a sling, until Reed had to open his eyes and say hey.

Thompson's a smart person, and Reed has a feeling he knows just about everything but he knows it's not his place to say, if Reed won't. Thompson has seen Boadicea for herself, in the mineshaft in the jungle, and while he came out from the battle just fine, there was a real chance he might not have. Reed knows now what Bo asked Thompson to do that nightâ€”Thompson told him afterwards, and he wasn't ashamed to. If it weren't for Lake... he said. Reed understood.

When Reed could sit up by himself, Thompson remarked to him, you remember when you said I had a death wish? Reed told him to drop it, and so he did. But Thompson's a smart personâ€”he knows Reed isn't so sure about everything anymore. Thompson was wrong, but maybe Reed was too, and maybe there was something to Thompson's readiness to die, that acceptance of coming fate all for reasons that only make sense to you, powerful because they make you who you are. Thompson, ready to die for age-old samurai-honour, Reed for, what, the search for righteousness? He had a death wish, all right. Something to prove, all right. Boadicea, he's still trying to figure out. Best he can

manage is that there are those beyond reason, exempt from this struggle of uncertainty that plague men like him and Thompson. People like Bo, they've already picked a side, and they are saintly in their own way. This institution, the military, is a cult of death. It will bring humanity through its darkest days and emerge, for these are the times. It is what's needed, as much as Reed loathes to admit it.

Boadicea will survive this war, Reed is certain. She will mother those who may newly emerge with her stories, and the ones who survived as well, who could survive because of her and killers like herâ€”because of the things she will do to the Covenant. Terrible, unspeakable, evil things. Necessary things. But they will hate as she has hated. This is the tragic outcome she can only bring. She is an angel of death for a time of death.

But on the other side of itâ€”Thompson's talk with Reed makes him realizeâ€”Boadicea doesn't stand unchallenged. There is the struggle, the line Reed has tried to hop back over to escape Boadicea's festering presence. There is still reason to hope.

Reed sees Thompson somewhere in the crowd of 906th men, listening to LeFae speak. Beside him is tall upright Sergeant Lake, and Reed suddenly feels a soothing calm from just seeing her. He doesn't hurt so bad anymore, doesn't feel pain of being directionless.

Lake pulled Thompson from the hopeless edge. How? Her strong-headedness, Reed supposes. She plucked the grenade, that gift of death he wanted so much, from his palm he was given to by devilish, alluring Boadicea. But something else, too, drives her: she carries a love for others. She cried for a taken man, Moyer, and did not swear revenge and lose herself. She cried because she felt like crying, allowed herself to when she said she wouldn't. There is power in this, and beauty, because she has retained a quality that quickly dies off all too often. Throughout all this, she carried a flame Boadicea has long smothered. Throughout all this, Lake never tossed aside what makes her incredibleâ€”what makes us incredible. She is the unbreakable spirit of humanity that is too easily broken, too easily snuffed out like a cigarette burning downâ€”this nicotine war that hurries the endâ€”and may become extinct when she is gone. She is Thompson's guardian. She is a protector. Where there should not exist a place for killers like Boadicea (and maybe Reed) at the end of a war, with Lake there is still hope in life that continues, even after the dark.

He worries for her for a moment when he catches himself thinking about Boadicea again, the depths of that woman and what she is capable of. There will be a struggle, and one side will win out as always, and Boadicea is a fucking fighter.

But Reed notices from his place behind the crowd that Boadicea stands isolated, always on the edge, and on the other side Lake is doing what she's wanted to do for a while nowâ€”she doesn't care what others might say if they saw anymoreâ€”she's holding Thompson's hand.

This is enough; despair will not win. _Blessed lady of sorrows, to you I surrender myself whole. I am yours always._

End
file.